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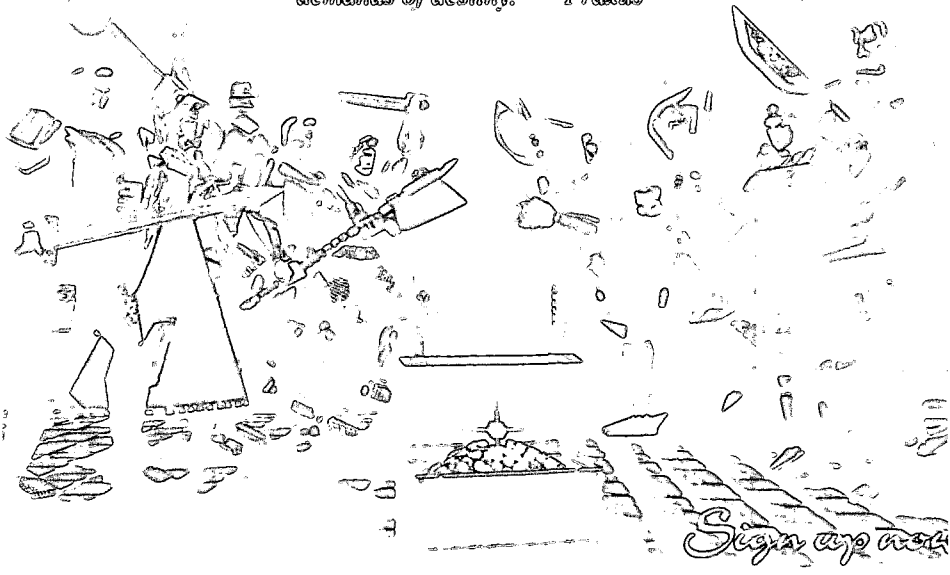

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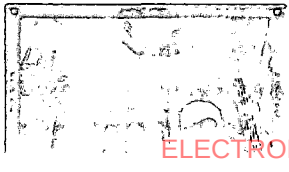

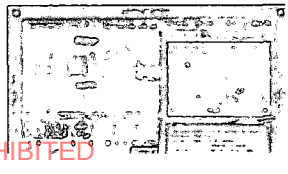

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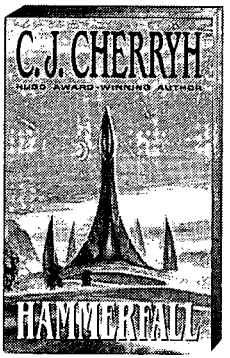

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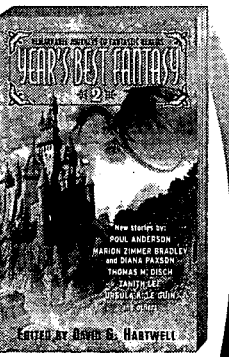

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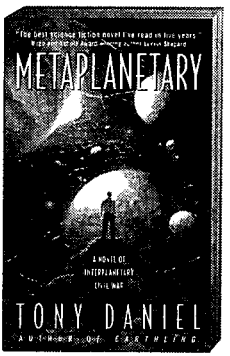

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NOVELLAS

BRONTE'S EGG 54 **Richard Chwedyk**

NOVELETS

THE FOURTH KISS 31 **Michael Libling**

WE COME NOT TO PRAISE WASHINGTON 140 **Charles Coleman Finlay**

SHORT STORIES

LEDA 5 **M. Rickert**

WHO WANTS TO LIVE FOREVER? 117 **Robert Thurston**

THE SYNCHRONOUS SWIMMER 122 **Harvey Jacobs**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 18 **Charles de Lint**

BOOKS 22 **Robert K.J. Killheffer**

PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS 112 **Paul Di Filippo**

FILMS 134 **Lucius Shepard**

COMING ATTRACTIONS 139

CURIOSITIES 162 **Bill Sheehan**

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The cover illustration for this story finished its long journey and reached our offices at last, so now we bring you the first of M. Rickert's contemporary retellings of classical Greek myths. From the title of this one, you'll have no trouble guessing which myth it retells...but you'll probably never predict some of the twists the story takes.

Leda

By M. Rickert

I CANNOT CRACK AN EGG without thinking of her. How could she do this to me, beautiful Leda, how could you do this to me? I begin each day with a three-egg omelet. I hold each fragile orb and think of the swell of her vulva. Then I hit it against the bowl. It breaks. A few shell pieces fall in with the sticky egg white and I chase them around with the tines of a fork and they always seem out of grasp and I think, just like her. But not really. Not ever-graspable Leda.

How do you love a beautiful woman? I thought I knew. I thought my love was enough. My devotion. I remember, when she went through that dragonfly stage and wore dragonfly earrings and we had dragonfly sheets and dragonfly lampshades and dragonfly pajamas, and I was just about sick of dragonflies, did I tell her? Did I say, Leda, I am just about sick of these god damn dragonflies. No. I said nothing. In fact, I sent away for dragonfly eggs. Eggs, imagine how that mocks me now! I followed the directions carefully and kept them a secret from her, oh it pains my heart to think of what she learned from my gift, I was like a dragonfly mother for christ's

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sake. I kept them in pond water. I kept them warm. At last they hatched, or uncocooned, however you'd call it, and still I tended them, secretly, until almost a thousand were born and these I presented to her in a box and when she opened it (quickly or the results might have changed) they flew out, blue and silver, yellow green purple. A thousand dragonflies for her and she looked at me with those violet eyes, and she looked at them as they flitted about and then she said, and I'll never forget this, she said, "They look different from the ones on our pajamas."

Oh Leda! My Leda in the garden bent over the summer roses, in her silk kimono with the dragonflies on it, and nothing underneath, and I come upon her like that, a vision, my wife, and she looks up just then and sees me watching and knows what she is doing when she unties the robe and lets it fall to the ground and then turns, and bends over, to prune the roses! Ha! In the dirt, in the sun, in the night. Always Leda. Always. Except for this.

She comes into the kitchen. Her eyes, black ringed, her feet bare and swollen, her belly juts out before her. She stands for a moment, just watching me crack eggs, and then she coughs and shuffles over to the coffee maker and pours herself a cup into which she starts spooning heaps of sugar and I try to resist the impulse but I cannot stop myself, after all, didn't I once love her, and I say, "'S not decaf."

I can tell she looks at me with those tired violet eyes but I refuse to return the courtesy and with proper wrist action (oh what Leda knew about proper wrist action!) whisk the eggs to a froth.

"How many times do I got a tell you," she says, "it ain't that kinda birth."

I shrug. Well, what would I know about it? A swan, she says. An egg.

YEAH, HE DID that thing with the dragonflies and I ain't never heard the end of it. "Don't you know how I love you?" he goes. "Don't you remember all them dragonflies?"

Yeah, I remember. I remember dragonflies in the sugar bowl, dragonflies in the honey. I remember dragonflies trapped in the window screens and dragonflies in my hair and on my bare skin with their tiny sticky legs creeping me out.

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What I remember most about the dragonflies is how he didn't get it. He always thinks he has to, you know, improve on me. That's how he loves me. I know that and I've known it for a long time and it didn't matter because he was good in bed, and in the dirt, and on the kitchen table and I thought we was friends, so what if he didn't really understand? A nice pair of dragonfly earrings, a necklace, that would have been enough. If I wanted bugs I wouldn't of been wearing them. Anyway, that's how I always felt and I didn't care that he's kinda stupid but now I do.

He cracks those eggs like it means something. I'm too tired to try to understand. I pour myself a coffee and he makes a big point of not looking at me and mumbling about how it ain't decaf and I want a pour the coffee right over his head but I resist the impulse and go sit in the living room in the green recliner that I got cozied up with piles of blankets like a nest and I drink my coffee and watch the birds. My whole body aches. I should leave him. He's failed me so completely. I sip the coffee. I try not to remember. Wings, oh impossible wings. The smell of feathers. The sharp beak. The cry. The pulsing beat. I press my hands against my belly. I should call someone but, after that first night, and that first phone call, I don't have the energy. I've entered a different life. I am no longer beautiful and loved. I am strange and lonely.

Rape hotline.

I...I....

Okay, take a deep breath.

He...he....

Yes?

He....

Yes?

Raped.

Okay. Okay. I am so sorry. It's good you called. We're here to help you. Is he gone?

Yes.

Are you safe?

What?

Is anyone with you?

My husband, but....

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Your husband is with you now?

Yes, but....

If you give me your address I can send someone over.

I....

Okay, are you crying?

He....

Yes?

Raped me.

Your husband?

No, no. He don't believe....

I'm sorry, I'm really sorry.

It happened.

I know. I know. Okay, can you give me your address?

A swan.

What?

Horrible.

Did you say swan?

I always thought they was so beautiful.

Swans?

Yes.

What do swans, I mean —

I was just taking a walk in our yard, you know, the moon was so pretty tonight and then he flew at me.

The swan?

Oh...god...yes. It was horrible.

Ma'am , are you saying you were raped by a swan?

Yes. I think I could recognize him in a lineup.

Could, could you put your husband on the phone?

He don't believe me.

I would really like to speak to him.

I showed him the feathers, the claw marks. I got red welts all over my skin, and bites, and he, do you know what he thinks?

Ma'am —

He thinks I cheated on him. He thinks I just made this up.

Ma'am, I think you've called the wrong number. There are other help lines.

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You don't believe me either.

I believe you've suffered some kind of trauma.

You don't believe a swan raped me, do you?

Ma'am, there are people who can help you.

No, I don't think so. I think everyone loves birds too much. Maybe not crows or blue jays 'cause everyone knows they steal eggs and peck out the brains of little birds, but swans, everyone loves swans, right?

Please, let me give you a different number to call.

No. I don't think so.

YES, I REMEMBER that particular phone call. It's always bothered me. What really happened to her? Or was it a joke? We do get prank calls, you know, though I can't imagine how confused someone must be to think calling a rape hotline could be entertaining. I mean, after all, if I'm talking to someone who isn't even serious, I'm not available for somebody who might really need my help.

What? Well, no, it wasn't a busy night at all. This isn't New York, for God's sake, we average, maybe, two, three rapes a year.

Well, she said she was raped by a swan. How believable is that? Not very, I can tell you. But I don't know...ever since then I've thought I could have handled that call better, you know? I'm a psych major and so I wonder, what really happened? What did the swan symbolize? I mean it's a classically beautiful bird, associated with fairy tales and innocence. Sometimes I wonder, was she really raped?

What? No. Of course I don't mean by a bird. I said a psych major, not a fairy tale believer. I mean, I know what's real and imagined. That's my area of expertise. Women are not raped by birds. But they are raped. Sometimes I wonder if that's what happened, you know, she was raped and it was all so horrible that she lost her mind and grasped this winged symbol of innocence, a swan. I mean let's not be too graphic here, but after all, how big is a swan's penis?

Excuse me? Well no, of course I don't mean to suggest that the horror of rape is measured by the size of the instrument used. What newspaper did you say you're from again? I think I've answered enough questions anyway, what can you tell me about this girl, I mean, woman?

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Woman Lays Egg!

Emergency room physicians were shocked and surprised at the delivery of a twenty-pound egg laid by a woman brought to the hospital by her husband Thursday night.

"She just look pregnant," said H.O. Mckille, an orderly at the hospital. "She didn't look no different from any other pregnant lady except maybe a little more hysterical 'cause she was shouting about the egg coming but nobody paid no attention really. Ladies, when they is in labor say all sorts a things. But then I heard Dr. Stephens saying, call Dr. Hogan, and he says, he's a veterinarian in town and that's when I walked over and got a good look and sure enough, ain't no baby coming out of that lady. It's a egg, for sure. But then Nurse Hiet pulls the curtain shut and I'm just standing there next to the husband and so I says, 'You can go in there, that Nurse Hiet just trying to keep me out. You're the husband, right?' He looked kind of in shock, poor guy, I mean who can blame him, it ain't every day your wife lays a twenty-pound egg."

Hospital officials refuse to comment on rumors that the woman is still a patient in a private room in the hospital, where she sits on her egg except for small periods of time when her husband relieves her.

An anonymous source reports, "None of us are supposed to be talking about it. I could lose my job. But, yeah, she's in there, trying to hatch the thing, and let me tell you something else, she's not too happy of a lady and she wants to go home to do this there but she's getting a lot of attention from the doctors and I'm not sure it's because they care about her. You know what I mean? I mean, remember that sheep that got cloned? Well, this is way more exciting than that, a woman who lays eggs. You ask me, there'll be some pressure for her to do it again. It ain't right really. She's a woman. She's gonna be a mama. She ain't some pet in the zoo. Don't use my name, okay, I need this job."

Sometimes she falls asleep on the egg. My Leda, who used to be so beautiful. Why did this happen to her? Why did it happen to us? I lift her up. She's light again since she's laid that thing. I lay her down on the bed. Her violet eyes flutter open. "My egg," she says, and struggles against me, "my baby."

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"Sh," I say, "go to sleep. I'll sit on it," and I do. I sit on this egg, which is still warm from Leda's upside-down heart-shaped ass that I used to cup in my hands and call my favorite valentine, and I think how life seems so strange to me now, all the things I used to know are confused.

Leda sleeps, gently snoring. I readjust my weight. It's rather uncomfortable on the egg. Even in sleep she looks exhausted. I can see the blue of her veins, new lines in her face. I never believed she was raped. By a swan. And now there's this, this impossible thing. Does it mean the whole story was true? If so, I have really failed her. How will I ever make it up to her? If not, if she cuckolded me, an old-fashioned word that seems so appropriate here, then she is making me into a laughingstock. You should hear the guys at work. The women just look at me and don't say anything at all.

I dream of a gun I do not own. I point it in different directions. Sometimes I am a hunter in red and black, stalking swans. Sometimes, I bring the gun to work and spray the office with bullets. Sometimes I point it at a mirror. Sometimes it is Leda's violet eyes I see. She doesn't scream. She doesn't really care about anything now. Except this egg.

HE LIFTS ME off the egg and carries me to the bed. "My egg. My baby." I'll sit on it, he says, and he does. I sink into sleep. I dream of feathers falling like snow. The sweep of wings across the sky. The pale white moon. My garden roses closed in the night. The sound of wings. A great white bird. White. I dream white. Silence and emptiness. The inside of an egg. A perfect world.

When I wake up he is still sitting on the egg. "Are you crying?" I say.

"Yes," he says, like it's something noble.

"Get off," I go, "I'll sit on it now."

"Don't you want a know why I'm crying?" he says.

"Get off. I don't want you making the baby sad with all your sad energy, it's had a hard enough beginning already."

"Leda, I'm sorry," he goes.

"Get off!" I shout. "Get off! Get off!"

He stands up.

A bunch of hospital people run into the room.

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"Leave us alone!" I shout.

He turns to the hospital people, those tears still on his face but drying up some, and he goes, "We need to be alone."

"No!" I shout. "You go too. Leave me and my baby alone." Then I pick up the egg.

They all gasp.

The egg is very heavy. I hold it close to my chest. "Forget it. I'll leave," I say.

That Nurse Hiet steps toward me but Dr. Hogan, the veterinarian, puts up his hand like a school crossing guard and she stops. "We don't want her to hurt the egg," he says.

Which shows how they don't understand. Hurt the egg? Why would I hurt the egg? My baby. It's not my baby's fault what the father did.

They all take a step back. Even my husband, which just proves how whatever he was loving it ain't about me. It was someone he imagined. Someone mean enough to crush my baby just to make a point.

I hold the egg real close. I am leaving the hospital. I was not prepared for the photographers.

CHICKEN WOMAN ESCAPES HOSPITAL WITH EGG!
EXCLUSIVE PHOTOS

Well, I thought they were artists or something like that. I was very surprised to learn that he is an insurance salesman. There's not much I can really tell you for certain. Their house is set back, off the road a bit and for most of the year it's well hidden by the foliage. During the winter months I've seen it, from a distance. It looks cute, bungalowish. I have a friend who knows somebody who once went to a party there, before they owned it, and she said it was very charming. The only personal experience I have had with either of them was a couple of springs ago when I was at Flormine's Garden Shop and she was there looking at rosebushes. I remember this so vividly because she was one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. She had purple eyes, quite striking really, pale skin, blonde hair, a striking figure. Everyone noticed her. When I look at these photographs, I have a hard time believing this is the same person. What happened to her? She looks quite frightened, doesn't she? I can't comment on the egg. I mean it's

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pretty obvious, isn't it? I don't know how she fooled the doctors but of course she didn't lay that egg. She's an ordinary woman. And by all appearances she needs help. I wish everyone would forget this nonsense and just get her the help she needs.

WHEN HE CAME home I had to let him in because sometimes I would get so tired I'd fall asleep and then when I woke up, I was kind of only half on the egg and half off and so I let him in if he promised to sit on it and he goes, "Leda, I love you" but I've heard that before and it don't mean nothing anymore from him. "Leda, please forgive me," he goes. I say, sit on the egg. I ain't got the strength to begin forgiving and I don't know if I ever will. I go upstairs and stare out the window at the garden which is all overgrowed now and I think how sorry just ain't enough.

We just made love, me and him and he fell asleep like he does, and I thought it would be nice to walk near my roses underneath that pale full moon and I put on my dragonfly kimono, it's silk and it feels so nice against my skin and it was a beautiful night just a little bit smelling of roses and I thought I was happy and then that swan comes swooping down and for just a moment I thought it was a sign, like of a good thing happening to me 'cause I ain't never seen a swan in my garden and I ain't never seen one flying and then it was on top of me. It was much heavier than I ever thought and when it flew into me I fell to the ground and I couldn't imagine, it was all feathers and wings and claws and beak and I was hitting it and trying to get away and also, at the same time feeling like why would a bird attack me and I didn't wanta hurt it I just wanted out and then, my god, I felt it, you know, and my mind could not, I couldn't...a swan doing this to me. I hit at it and clawed at it and it bit me and scratched me and the whole time those wings was flapping and.... So now people are making jokes about it, about me. I ain't stupid. I know that. Don't tell me about some lady I never met who feels sorry for me because she don't really believe it happened. I don't give a shit. And when my husband keeps saying, sorry, sorry, what am I supposed to do with that? This happened to me and it was horrible and when I needed him most he was making three-egg omelets and trying to figure out who I cheated on him with. So, he's sorry? Well, what's he gonna do about that?

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I can't take care of him. It's all I can do to take care of myself and my baby.

Also, one more thing. Since it's truth time. It did occur to me once or twice to break the egg, I mean in the beginning. What will I do if I hatch a swan? Thanksgiving, I guess. Yeah, sometimes I think like that and don't gasp and look away from me. I ain't evil. I'm just a regular woman that something really bad happened to and when it did I learned some things about the world and myself that maybe I'd rather not know. But that don't change it. I stand at the bedroom window and watch my garden dying. What do I believe in now? I don't know.

I DON'T KNOW what to do for her. I sit on the egg and remember the good times. Leda laughing. Leda in the garden. Leda dancing. Leda naked. Beautiful, beautiful Leda. Beneath me I feel a movement, hear a sound. I sit very still, listen very carefully. There it is again. "Leda!" I shout. "Leda!" She comes running down the stairs. Where'd she get that robe? I didn't even know she owned such a thing. Blue terry cloth, stained with coffee. She stares at me with those dark-rimmed eyes, wide with fright. "What?" she says.

"Baby's coming," I whisper and slide off the egg.

WE STAND SIDE by side watching the egg shake. I can hardly breathe. A chip of eggshell falls on the quilt. I find myself praying. Just a general sort of plea. Please.

Please let my baby not be a swan.

He takes my hand. I let him. It is the first human touch other than the doctors and I don't feel like they count, since the night when it happened. It feels strange to be touched. I can feel his pulse, his heat. It feels good and strange. Not bad. I just ain't sure how long I will let it continue.

We watch the egg tremble and crack and I feel like I am standing at the edge of something big, like the white in my dreams. Everything is here now. All my life. All my love. What comes out of that egg will make me either drown in the white or fly out of it. I wanta fly out of it but I ain't got the strength to do anything about it.

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That's when I see a tiny fist.

I pull my hand away from him and cover my mouth. No wings, I pray, please.

A violet eye!

I am standing so still in case if I move we fall into a different reality.

No beak, I think, and just then, like the world was made of what we want, I see the mouth and I start to laugh but I stop because some more eggshell falls off and a second mouth appears right beside the first one and I don't know what that's all about.

Please, I think, please.

I DIDN'T KNOW what to think. I've been pretty ambivalent about the whole egg thing to be honest. I mean, I only sat on it for her. But as soon as it started hatching I felt excited and then kind of nervous. Like, what's happening here? Are we going to have a baby bird? How do I feel about that? I didn't even think about it when I reached over and took her hand. I just did it like we hadn't been having all this trouble and then I realized we were holding hands and I was so happy about that, it distracted me from the egg for a minute.

I think we were both relieved to see the little fist. Of course, I knew we weren't in the clear yet. I mean it was very possible that we were hatching some kind of feathered human, or some such combination.

Could I love the baby? Yes, this thought occurred to me. Could I love this baby from this horrible act? To be honest, I didn't know if I could.

She pulled her hand away. I ached for her immediately. We saw an eye, violet, just like hers, and I thought I could definitely love the baby if it looked like her and then we saw the mouth, and after a moment, another mouth and I thought FREAK. I know I shouldn't have thought it, but I did. I thought, we are going to have this freak for a child.

All these images flashed through my mind of me carrying around this two-mouthed baby, of it growing feathers during puberty, long talks about inner beauty. I had it all figured out. That's when I knew. Even if it had two mouths and feathers, I could love this kid.

I looked at Leda. It was like something momentous had happened to me and she didn't even realize it. She stood there in that old blue terry

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cloth robe, with the coffee stains down the front, her hair all a tangle, her violet eyes circled in fright, her face creased with lines, her hands in fists near her mouth and I wanted to tell her, "Sh, don't worry. Everything's going to be all right. It doesn't matter how it looks." But I didn't say anything because I also finally realized I wasn't going to teach her anything about love. Not Leda, who carried this thing, and laid it, and took it away from all those cold and curious doctors and brought it home and sat on it and let her own beauty go untended so she could tend to it. I have nothing to teach her. *I* have much to learn.

Then I knowed what was happening. When the egg really started to fall apart. Two mouths. Four fists. Four legs. Two heads. And, thank god, two separate beautiful perfect little girl bodies. Two babies, exhausted and crying. I walked over to them and kneeled down beside them and then I just brushed the eggshell off and that gooey stuff and one of them had violet eyes, and the other looks like my husband I realized that on that night I got pregnant twice. Once by my husband and once by that swan and both babies are beautiful in their own way though I gotta admit the one that looks kind of like me, from before this all happened, will probably grow to be the greater beauty, and for this reason I hold her a little tighter, 'cause I know how hard it can be to be beautiful.

My husband bends over and helps brush the eggshell and gooey stuff off and we carry the babies to the couch and I lay down with them and untie my robe and I can hear my husband gasp, whether for pleasure or sorrow I don't know. My body has changed so much. I lay there, one baby at each breast sucking.

Oh Leda, will you ever forgive me? Will you trust me with our girls? Will I fail them too? Is this what love means? The horrible burden of the damage we do to each other? If only I could have loved you perfectly. Like a god, instead of a human. Forgive me. Let me love you and the children. Please.

She smiles for the first time in months, yawns and closes those beautiful eyes, then opens them wide, a frightened expression on her face. She looks at me, but I'm not sure she sees me, and she says, "swan" or was it "swine"? I can't be sure. I am only certain that I love her, that I will

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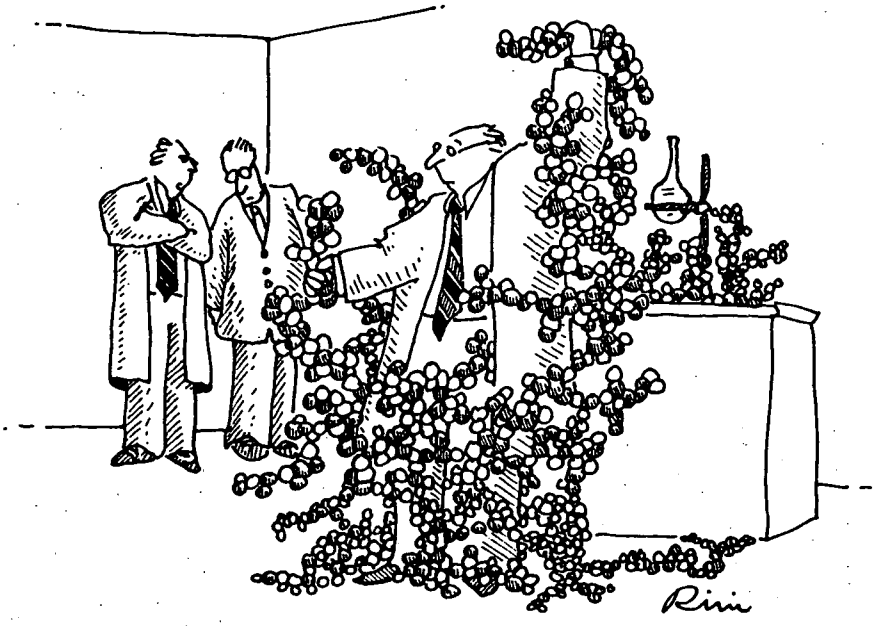
always love her. Leda. Always, always Leda. In your terry cloth robe with coffee stains, while the girls nap and you do too, the sun bright on the lines of your face; as you walk to the garden, careful and unsure; as you weed around the roses, Leda, I will always love you, Leda in the dirt, Leda in the sun, Leda shading her eyes and looking up at the horrible memory of what was done to you, always Leda, always.



"Modeling rapidly mutating viruses can be tricky."

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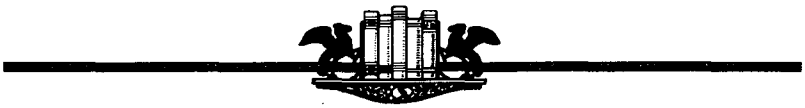

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Ogre's Wife and Other Fairy Tales for Grown-Ups, by Richard Parks, Obscura Press, 2002, $18.95.

READERS pay far less attention to writers' bylines than the writers themselves would probably like. This is especially true with magazines and anthologies where one is presented with large numbers of bylines, all bunched together on the contents page, many of them unfamiliar. Readers are far more likely to remember the standout story than the name of the person who wrote it.

I know I'm guilty of this behavior. I try to pay attention to the bylines, but I simply read and sample too many short stories, and my recall for facts and figures has never been particularly good (just ask my annoyed teachers, back in my school days). But I do remember the stories.

I mention this because when a friend brought Richard Parks's collection to my attention, I started to read it on his recommendation, rather than on the basis of any personal familiarity with Parks's byline. So I was surprised to discover that I'd read most of these stories before. Not only read them, but was quite taken with them at the time of those first readings.

Discovering them again in *The Ogre's Wife* has only increased my admiration for Parks's remarkable storytelling talents.

I think part of the reason that his name didn't stick with me (as in "oh, this is a Richard Parks story so it'll be good") is because his story palette is so much larger than that of most writers. He ranges with enviable ease from high fantasy, fairy tale, and fable (as in "My Lord Teaser," the title story, and "Golden Bell, Seven, and the Marquis of Zeng") to dark fantasy ("Doing Time in the Wild Hunt"), contemporary fantasy ("Take a Long Step"),

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near future sf (the wonderful trio of stories featuring the ghost hunter, Eli Mothersbaugh), and even *Twilight Zone*-ish excursions (such as my favorite story in the collection, "Borrowed Lives").

Along the way we also get to step into the minds of gods (Norse, as well as Christianity's God), have a speculative peek into the possible future of the entertainment industry, and find out how and why fairies die.

In short, Parks is all over the place in terms of subject manner and style. But it's to his enormous credit that all these different voices ring true. You never get the sense that he's merely dabbling in various genres, or that he can't make up his mind as to what sort of story he wants to tell. Instead, like the best storytellers, he goes where the tale takes him, and then proceeds to write that story as truthfully as possible, in the voice that he needs: sometimes lyrical, sometimes hard-edged; sometimes in a voice that sounds as ancient as the first stories told around our early ancestors' campfires; sometimes in a voice so new that we have yet to hear it.

What ties the material together is that, without exception, these stories all have heart. Even the lighter pieces have a foundation of emotional fortitude as solid as bedrock.

The Ogre's Wife is an absolute treasure of a collection, one that I know I will return to again and again. And now when I see that byline of Richard Parks in a magazine or anthology, not only will I remember it, but his story will be the first I'll turn to.

I've read this from an advance galley, and the publisher is unfamiliar to me, so I can't tell you what the book itself will look like. But I do know that it also has an insightful introduction by Parke Godwin.

If your local book store doesn't carry this book, try contacting the publisher at: Obscura Press, P.O. Box 1992, Ames, IA 50010-1992.

How to Get Your e-Book Published, by Richard Curtis & William Thomas Quick, Writer's Digest Books, 2002, $16.99.

I don't plan to make a habit of reviewing how-to books in this column. However, I will do so when I see a title that is of broader interest than might be a simple discussion of the mechanics of writing. The book in hand is a perfect example.

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Yes, as you'd expect from the title, it does discuss the minutiae of creating, formatting, publishing, and distributing an e-book. But it also provides a very good background on the whole phenomenon of electronic publishing, from a history of the Web and the first electronically distributed texts through to informed speculations on where e-publishing will take us in the future.

I'm not familiar with William Thomas Quick, though perhaps I should be since he's cited as having written more than thirty books and his short story "Bank Robbery," published in *Analog* back in 1989, apparently predicted the e-book revolution before it was even in its infancy.

I am familiar with Richard Curtis, as I assume most everyone in the field is. Although better known as an agent, Curtis is also an author and the driving force behind e-reads, an e-book and print publisher specializing in keeping backlist books in print. Like Quick, Curtis was on the cutting edge of e-publishing before most of us even realized how viable it would be, and I especially admire the fact that he was willing to put his money where his mouth was in the formation of e-reads. Its subsequent success makes it clear that he knew, and knows, what he's doing.

How to Get Your e-Book Published is written in an easy-to-understand manner that's both good and bad. Because much of its audience might not even be familiar with computers, the authors explain in clear and basic detail the basics of the Web, word processing programs, image files, compression programs, and text formats. Which is good for those new to the material, but might at times feel too simplistic for anyone with some familiarity in the subject. That said, I think that only the most knowledgeable expert won't find something of use and of interest in its pages. This is especially true when the authors speculate on where this rapidly growing offshoot of traditional publishing is bound.

I did note one surprising omission, however. The authors appear to ignore completely the enormous presence that handheld devices such as Palms, Visors, iPaqs, etc., have in the e-book world. I know many, many people who read e-books, and those are the devices they use to read them — not the desktop and notebook computers or dedicated e-book readers that the authors do discuss.

They also ignore the PDB format

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—perhaps not so surprisingly, since this is one of the main formats used by those same handheld devices (and makes for a much better reading experience than the clunky software made by Microsoft or Adobe, for example). The PDB format provides the option for full formatting and encryption, and I'd say that ninety-five percent of the people I know who read e-books are reading them in this format. There are also many free readers available for PDB text files from the Palm Reader that works for both the Palm OS and Pocket PC, as well as others such as SmartDoc, AportisDoc, etc., that support only the Palm OS.

So it doesn't make sense to ignore it.

On an amusing note, I did a Web search (in March) for an e-book version of *How to Get Your e-Book Published* (given its subject, it seems a given that it would be available), but it wasn't to be found. Although to be fair to the authors, that might have more to do with the publisher not wanting to cut into their print sales.

Still, nitpicking aside, if you have any interest in this subject, this is an excellent jumping-in point. And if you're an author, or a regular reader, you *should* have an interest, since e-publishing will continue to become an ever-stronger presence in how we access our reading material — not in the far future, but month by month from this point on.

E-books won't necessarily replace hard copies, and frankly, I don't think they should, but they will certainly augment publishing lists, allowing many more out-of-print books, or quirky ones, to remain "in print." And from both a reader and an author's point of view, that's a good thing.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Books

ROBERT K. J. KILLHEFFER

The Annotated Flatland, by Edwin A. Abbott, introduction and notes by Ian Stewart, Perseus Publishing, 2002, $30.

Schild's Ladder, by Greg Egan, Eos, 2002, $25.95.

"He who still sees the stars as 'up' does not perceive with the eye of truth."

— Friedrich Nietzsche

NOW AND then it pays to wonder what "science" signifies in the term science fiction. If it were called carpentry fiction, we'd expect to read about the work of carpenters, but science fiction clearly isn't restricted to recounting the labors of scientists. Most sf pays no attention to what actual scientists do, today or in their imagined futures. Some sf takes its inspiration from scientific concepts, or indulges in informative lectures on scientific topics, but this is not what gives the genre its name. We all recognize works with little or no explicit scientific content nonetheless as sf — think of Philip K. Dick, R. A. Lafferty, Joanna Russ.

If the science in sf's name means anything — and I think it does — it's something more figurative, something that connects it to science on a less literal level. Science fiction is fiction that *behaves* like science — it adopts the same viewpoint, and produces a similar emotional effect. Science (done right) questions received wisdom and reexamines common assumptions. It subjects opinions to testing against observed facts, and in the process it makes the familiar seem strange.

From the scientific perspective, little that we know is as it seems. The stars are not mere points of light, they are huge balls of fiery gas, unimaginably distant Olympian campfires around which other worlds might huddle. The ground

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beneath our feet is not firm, but constantly in motion, though we do not feel it. The tabletop is not solid, but composed of the tiniest particles, which are themselves mostly space: what seems solid is really hole-riddled, more empty than full. Science and science fiction both believe that this process of estrangement offers a path to enlightenment — that the altered reality it offers comes closer to the truth, and from that truth we might take a greater wisdom.

This view of sf emerges clearly in Edwin A. Abbott's beloved *Flatland*, originally published in 1884 and since reissued in a variety of editions and several other languages. Mathematician and popular science writer Ian Stewart has now produced the first annotated version, on the heels of his own sequel to Abbott, *Flatterland* (2001).[1]

Stewart's notes bring a welcome new level to Abbott's classic. They help us to know the author and to understand the gestation of the book. They flesh out the mathematical concepts in the text, as they existed before and during Abbott's time, and as they have evolved in the years since. Perhaps most valuably, they place Abbott and his book solidly in their social and cultural context. Stewart reveals connections to notable figures and events of the time, from the mathematician George Boole to Karl Marx, and traces ideas about extra dimensions — especially the fourth — as they may have influenced or been influenced by Abbott's book.

Abbott himself was no sf writer, not as a vocation. He was an Anglican priest and spent most of his professional career as headmaster of the City of London School. He wrote several dozen other books, but none like *Flatland*: mostly theology and devotional literature, and English and Latin grammar. Only *Flatland* continues to attract readers.

And it deserves them. It's a charming bit of Victorian whimsy with undercurrents of a more serious nature, a literary curiosity that leaves a surprisingly firm impression on the mind. The diction of the schoolmaster is perfectly suited to its mixture of studious exactitude and playful fancy: "Windows there are none in our houses: for the light comes to us alike in our houses and out of them, by day and by night,

[1]There seems to be a mini-revival of Flatland in effect. Just as this column was going to press, we received Spaceland, a novel by Rudy Rucker that attempts to do for the fourth dimension what Flatland did for the third.

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equally at all times and in all places, whence we know not."

Flatland is a mathematical fantasy, set in a world of two dimensions, a plane, upon (or, more correctly, *in*) which exists a civilization of polygons — triangles, squares, pentagons, etc. — not accidentally reminiscent of British Victorian society in its basic structures and attitudes. We learn of this world through the writings of one of its citizens, A. Square[2], who receives a glimpse of our own world — "Spaceland" — through the intercession of a visitor, the Sphere.

The first part of *Flatland* — "This World" — introduces the place and its inhabitants. A. Square explains how things appear to two-dimensional sight (everything is straight lines), and how the Flatlanders nevertheless manage to recognize each other and their different shapes. He describes the environment (a slight "gravitational" attraction exists in one direction, which they term South, and so allows them to orient themselves), the layout of Flatland houses, family life, and class divisions based on shape (or, more properly, on number and sharpness of angles). We learn little of Flatland history, but A. Square does recount a period when Flatlanders experimented with the use of color painted on their sides to assist in recognition, and how this innovation produced social upheaval and was banned.

Abbott was a progressive thinker, and this section of *Flatland* is thick with social satire. Abbott advocated improved education for women (which was sorely limited in his time, particularly in the realm of mathematics), and the place of women in Flatland forms the center of his ironic critique. (In his introduction and notes, Stewart tells us that many of Abbott's readers, though sympathetic to his views, missed the irony in his tone, and complained about the portrait of women in the first edition. The second edition, on which Stewart's text is based, includes a preface in which Abbott tries to clear this up.)

In Flatland, women are lines — or, rather, polygons of only two sides. Since social status grows in proportion to the number of a

[2]Stewart doesn't mention the possibility, but the name of Abbott's protagonist seems to contain an echo of his own. Through a peculiarity of family history, Abbott's middle name was Abbott also; he was Edwin Abbott Abbott, or (in the mathematical terminology he enjoyed) Edwin Abbott-squared. His initials were E. A. A., or E. A-squared.

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citizen's sides, and estimations of intelligence and moral fortitude vary likewise, Flatland's women are consigned to the lowest level on all scales, below even the "Soldiers and Lowest Classes of Workmen," who are isosceles triangles. Abbott's satire, like that of Swift and others before him, trades on outrageous exaggeration. Women are "wholly devoid of brain-power, and have neither reflection, judgment nor forethought, and hardly any memory." It says something unflattering about the actual opinions of women in Abbott's time that anyone could have misunderstood his intent.

Abbott isn't content simply to spoof Victorian chauvinism, he also slyly suggests its psychological underpinnings. Sharp angles are what make the isosceles triangles suitable as soldiers, and "if a Soldier is a wedge, a Woman is a needle." Her two points make her deadly: "what can it be to run against a Woman, except absolute and immediate destruction?" And so in Flatland women are subject to heavy restrictions in order to minimize their danger to the men — they have their own doors into buildings, and they are required to emit a "Peace-cry" at all times to announce their locations. In Flatland, discrimination against women stems directly from men's fear of them. Abbott even introduces a little pre-Freudian analysis into the equation. On one end women have an eye and mouth; it's the other, the "nether end," that is most likely to wound a man accidentally, and so women's nether end is the focus of men's fears, possessed of "a death-dealing but inaudible sting."

Flatland remains interesting so many years after its original publication in part because many of the social concerns of Abbott's period remain issues today. The society of Flatland raises questions of nature versus nurture in criminal behavior, the clash of high and low culture in the arts, class hierarchy and elitism, even domestic violence. "I have actually known a case," A. Square mentions, "where a Woman has exterminated her whole household, and half an hour afterward, when her rage was over and the fragments swept away, has asked what has become of her husband and her children." Flatland's social relevance is hardly confined to its historical period.

The second part of *Flatland* — "Other Worlds" — concerns A. Square's encounters with higher and lower dimensions. First he visits a world of one dimension,

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"Lineland," in a dream. He tries to explain to one of its inhabitants the limited nature of his world, and the higher truth of Flatland. But the Linelander will have none of it, considering A. Square's ideas nonsense. "Besotted Being!" A. Square says finally in exasperation. "You think yourself the perfection of existence.... You profess to see, whereas you can see nothing but a Point!"

Abbott was a teacher and is not overly subtle. The Lineland episode serves to prepare the reader for A. Square's own reaction when the Sphere visits him in turn from the land of three dimensions. His objections mimic the Linelander's almost exactly. Words having failed, the Sphere resorts to show and tell: he tears A. Square out of his plane and moves him into Spaceland itself.

The first section made the familiar strange by showing us Victorian society reproduced in a two-dimensional world of sentient geometrical shapes. Now A. Square himself experiences the cognitive dislocation of a new perspective — most literally — and his response is characteristic of reactions to scientific revelation: "Either this is madness," he says, "or it is Hell." But quickly he changes his mind and embraces the Sphere's gift of transcendent knowledge. When he returns to Flatland, his preaching on the existence and significance of higher dimensions gets him thrown into prison.

Abbott was a churchman, an academic, and a mathematician, and in A. Square's story the strands of religion and science become entwined inextricably. In his dedication, Abbott describes A. Square's experience in unmistakably religious terms — he is "Initiated into the Mysteries," and the world of three dimensions is "that Celestial Region." But it's a spiritual achievement founded on scientific insight, clearly intended to suggest a similar process for his readers. *Flatland* perfectly encapsulates one of the common themes of sf, the ennobling possibilities of the scientific perspective, the power of science to free us from "our respective Dimensional prejudices" — to lift us, as the Sphere lifted A. Square, into a position of greater wisdom.

Greg Egan's latest novel, *Schild's Ladder*, shares Abbott's perspective-altering agenda, and it ventures into areas much more challenging to twenty-first-century sensibilities. Egan's novels tend to be so full of ideas that they defy simple

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summary, and I doubt I can convey the intellectual richness of the book here. I can only hope that, if my description inspires any curiosity, you'll go and read the book for yourself.

More than twenty thousand years from now, humanity has spread itself to thousands of other worlds, and through a variety of means has extended life spans so that they are practically unlimited. Light speed has not been beaten, however, so travel between planets leaves the traveler hopelessly out of chronological synch with the planet she left. Most people never leave their home planets, and those who do form an entirely different sort of community, running across each other here and there around the cosmos, leaping past whole eras of planetary history with each trip. Their journeys take place at light speed, with the traveler in the form of an encoded transmission. Upon arrival, a body may be created — not always like the one left behind — but many people now live entirely bodiless in the infosphere.

Egan introduces us to his imaginary world in time-honored manner of sf, with an immersion in strangeness punctuated by just enough comprehensibility for us to hang our grappling hooks on while we get oriented. Egan's especially good at this sort of thing, and he packs a lot into sentences like this: "From the moment she'd arrived, as a stream of ultraviolet pulses with a header requesting embodiment on almost any terms, the Mimosans had been polite and accommodating."

In the opening section of *Schild's Ladder* — something of a long prologue — the physicist Cass has traveled to Mimosa Station in hope that the station's resident scientists will agree to run an experiment she has proposed. Cass wants to create a tiny bubble of spacetime with different rules from our own. Her calculations indicate that it should last for only six trillionths of a second, but something goes wrong. The bubble grows uncontrollably, expanding at half the speed of light, and devouring — converting — normal spacetime and everything in it as it goes.

The novel proper opens six hundred years later, after the Mimosan novo-vacuum has obliterated two thousand populated star systems. A research ship, the *Rindler*, has been positioned near the expanding border, moving away from it as fast as it grows, and here interested parties have gathered to study the bubble.

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Egan doesn't adopt a typical race-to-save-the-universe scenario. The *Rindler* plays host to a variety of factions, principally divided into the Yielders and the Preservationists. The Yielders believe that the new spacetime has an equal right to exist, and that the only ethical approach would be (at most) to stabilize the border and prevent further expansion. The Preservationists think the survival of the old universe is the most important thing, and the only way to ensure it is to destroy the bubble. Since no one knows how to accomplish either goal, the debate remains theoretical, and both sides work together most of the time in studying the novo-vacuum, though tensions have grown by the time a new Yielder, Tchicaya, arrives on the *Rindler*. The issue reaches a crisis when the researchers detect a signal — which implies that living creatures of some kind exist in the novo-vacuum.

Egan is as interested as Abbott in challenging the comfortable assumptions with which we surround ourselves. No one here has a gender or even a permanent set of sex organs (though Egan uses gendered pronouns, perhaps to let the narrative flow smoothly — we don't have a good neutral alternative, so deeply ingrained is the gender assumption). Under some conditions, when the emotional resonance is right, two people may spontaneously develop sex organs uniquely suited to each other — different every time — and if the bond fades, so do the organs. What's most striking about Egan's scheme is how offhandedly he treats the idea; it's not the center of the story, but it does mean that a whole category of interpersonal issues we take for granted doesn't exist in Egan's world.

He handles most of the cultural differences of this future with a similar casualness that tends to heighten their strangeness. One character, normally acorporeal, describes his childhood this way: "'My earliest memories are of CP4 — that's a Kahler manifold that looks locally like a vector space with four complex dimensions, though the global topology's quite different. But I didn't really grow up there; I was moved around a lot when I was young, to keep my perceptions flexible.'" Courtship in his society involves giving creative intellectual presents, such as mathematical theorems. "'When I was ten years old, all I gave my sweetheart was a pair of projections that turned the group of rotations in four dimensions into principal bundles over

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the three-sphere. Ancient constructions, though I did rediscover them for myself.'" There's a bit of inescapable humor in moments like this, but that's not how Egan plays them. He presents them as normal — making our more limited ideas appear the oddity.

Schild's Ladder is a brief book, and we only get brief glimpses of what must be complex social and cultural patterns in this world. We see some of Mimosa, and some of the *Rindler*, and some of life on one of the settled worlds, but just enough to get a sense of the general shape of things. Out of these hints, Egan constructs a society that looks very strange, but feels recognizably human. As in *Flatland*, human nature remains the same at some level, no matter how different the setting. The debate between the Yielders and the Preservationists contains echoes of issues that divide our world — tensions between development and conservation, and between intercultural respect and universal values.

One of Egan's great achievements here is his portrayal of human beings much saner and stabler than we know them, without losing their individuality and interest, or their passion. The coexistence of such radically opposed viewpoints on the *Rindler*, in the midst of a disaster of cosmic scale, can scarcely be imagined in our world. Egan's characters display a wholly unfamiliar level of rationality under the most trying circumstances. "The fate of the vacuum had to be decided on its merits, not treated as a surrogate through which its creators could be condemned or absolved," thinks Tchicaya, summing up the majority opinion.

And Egan presents a credible sense of optimism, that the future of humanity might hold more happiness and less conflict than our

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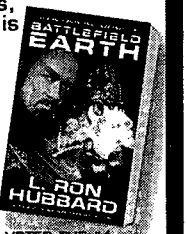

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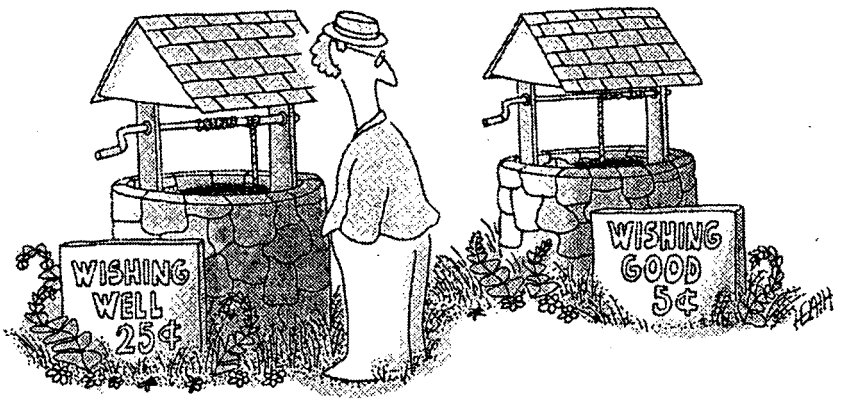
history thus far has known — and that it might achieve that state through the application of scientific knowledge. Encountering this attitude in *Schild's Ladder* reminds one just how scarce it has become, in sf or out.

At one point, a Preservationist attacks Tchicaya for his interest in saving and even exploring the novovacuum. "What do you think you're going to find in there?" she asks scornfully. "Some great shining light of transcendence?"

Tchicaya calmly dismisses the suggestion, and Egan launches a brief tirade on the subject. Transcendence, he says, "was a content-free word left over from religion.... It was probably an appealing notion if you were so lazy that you'd never actually learned anything about the universe you inhabited, and couldn't quite conceive of putting in the effort to do so...."

But I think Egan protests a little too strongly. Transcendence is exactly what *Schild's Ladder* offers, in the same manner as *Flatland*: the transcendence of our own constraints, our familiar boundaries, the limits and viewpoints that entrap us, our "Dimensional prejudices." It's good to see that the notion still lives, a century and more after poor A. Square landed in prison, a prophet, like them all, unloved in his own land.



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From his home in Montreal, Michael Libling reports that his literary efforts of late have been directed towards a novel, but he took time out from the book to share this tale with us. Mr. Libling's previous contributions to F&SF *include "Timmy Gobel's Bug Jar" (Dec. 2001), "Sitters" (June 1996), and "Mosquito League" (Aug. 1997). In the past, he has been a columnist for the* Montreal Gazette *and the* Vancouver Sun *and he hosted a radio phone-in trivia show for more than a dozen years, but nowadays he works freelance in the promotional and advertising fields when not writing fiction.*

The Fourth Kiss

By Michael Libling

CLOSEST I'VE COME TO romanticizing this whole thing is the Wolfman. Except he only had to worry about his hangup once a month. Me, it was every damn Tuesday, full moon, half moon, no moon.

Tuesday nights, I grab a baseball bat, crowbar, brick, rock, trash can, any frigging thing that isn't chained down, and I smash out cars. Windshields, fenders, mirrors, taillights, headlights — whatever. I've been doing it for years. Rain or shine. Blizzard. Heat wave. I'm out there. All over the place. You should've seen what I did in Yosemite a few summers back. On my vacation, yet. With Laura and the kids asleep back at the campground. You should've seen. Smashing is my thing. Others steal, maim, rape, murder, blow crap up, but me it's smashing.

You'd think I'd be bored with it by now. But I'm not. You'd think I might've moved up to something bigger by now. Like stealing, maiming, raping, murder or blowing crap up. But I haven't. No, I'm one of the lucky ones. Just Tuesdays, just cars. And there is nothing in this world I would

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rather be doing. Except when I am not doing it. That's always been the funny thing. From Wednesday to Monday, I hardly think about it. But come Tuesday nights, there's just no stopping me.

"Why can't you sleep on Tuesdays?" Laura always wanted to know. She asked me so many times, I should have hired a jingle writer to set the words to music.

"Just one of those things, I guess," I told her.

"Where do you go?"

"I drive."

"You're not doing things to cars again, are you, Scott? Please, tell me you're not."

"No, of course not. I learned my lesson." She knew only of the last time I was caught — my second time. The plea bargain. The restitution. The court-decreed therapy. The professional assessment that cited job and stress.

"Are you having an affair, Scott? Is that it? Tell me the truth. Are you cheating on me?"

"Cross my heart." But, fact is, she had pretty much hit the nail on the head with that one, though not in any way she or anyone else might assume. Fact is, I've been having an affair of sorts since I was twelve.

She does not know of the first time I was caught. My junior year of college. The cop asked, "Now why would a nice young fellow like you want to go and do something so nonsensical like this?"

My reply surprised me as much as it did the cop. "Because of a girl," I told him.

"Must be quite a gal."

"Oh, yeah," I nodded. "She's that, all right."

I am in Serenity Room B of the Fairweather & Baynes Funeral Home on Seymour Street in Dorrit Point, in the days when Dorrit Point was still a place people came to raise a family. Before graffiti. Before hash and meth and smack and blow and crack. Before people locked their doors.

I am attending my first funeral.

Paula Canta's mother lies in the coffin, the top down for reasons too messy to talk about. As my mother abandons me to make her rounds of the mourners, I slip behind a wreath propped to the right of the coffin. The

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wreath is only slightly less large than a Ferris wheel, I think. At its center is a small painting of Mrs. Canta. A lady I do not know tells everyone who passes that this is her sister's final self-portrait; everyone tells the lady how beautiful and talented her sister was, and what a tragedy this is. Just when I am certain that no one will notice me, that I have found refuge, a rigid finger drills me in the small of my back. I am too frightened to move, certain that the late Mrs. Canta is about to ask me for a glass of water or worse, say a goblet of my blood. The second poke targets my forearm. It is Paula Canta.

Until now, I had only thought of her as brainy, not pretty. But pretty she is in a puffy black dress with white frills on the sleeves, her dark hair in pigtails, a shiny black ribbon around each. I fumble for something to say, when she cups both hands over my ear, whispers, "I killed her, Scotty." But she can tell by the dumb look on my face that I don't think I heard her right, so she says it again: "I killed her, Scotty."

I peek through the wreath to see if anyone has heard besides me, but all I hear is "This was her final self-portrait," and "What a tragedy. She was so beautiful, so talented." Then, with those tiny hands still over her mouth, Paula grins, winks at me, as if her confession is our little secret. *Who grins at their own mother's funeral? Winks?* "Bull," I whisper back, but she shakes her head from side to side, her grin so tight her lips are white, and I know she has told me something I do not want to know. *Should not know.* What makes this stranger still is that Paula Canta has never said so much as two words to me before — words I could understand, I mean. Sure, I know her; we've been together since kindergarten — eight straight years. We've just never hung out together. Not even the same birthday parties. She has her friends and I have mine, though now that I think about it, I cannot recall exactly who any of her friends are; from what I've seen, they change all the time.

"It was just after Mass. Mother wanted to make angels in the snow. We were going to make a hundred. They were going to be our special Christmas gift to Jesus, so when he looked down on Dorrit Point, he would see all the angels and smile, knowing we loved him — my mom, my dad, and me — and that Christmas meant a lot more than merely Santa Claus and presents. That's what Mother said. And she wanted me to choose all the spots, you know, where the angels were to go? Yours was the first yard

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I chose, Scotty. And then we did every house after yours — nine or ten, at least, before the Fernshaws'."

"It was an accident," I say. "Everybody says so."

"No," Paula insists. "I abhor angels in the snow." And all I'm thinking is how many twelve-year-olds, besides English guys in beanies and short pants, use words like *abhor*. That was the trouble with Paula Canta: *Little Miss Know-it-all, Egghead, Teacher's Pet, Miss Big Words.* Of course, as I would come to learn, that was hardly the only trouble with Paula Canta. "I hate the cold on my back, the ice down my neck. But most of all, I hate the clarinet. The incessant practicing. Mother was unrelenting. I knew the fence was beneath the snow, Scotty; I knew the Fernshaws' fence was there."

I'd gone to see where the accident happened almost as soon as I heard about it. But I don't mention this to Paula. For some reason, and I can't say why, I don't want her to think I'm like everybody else, even though I am starting to realize I probably am. Anyhow, it was easy enough to find, even if you didn't know where the Fernshaws lived. Just a matter of following the angels to the short black spikes poking up through the snow.

Except for a few overlooked streaks of pink, the blood had pretty much been cleared by the time I got there. But it was easy to imagine Mrs. Canta "stuck like a pig" as some folks would later say, though Paula's mom didn't look anything like a pig. All that remained of her were the tips of her last angel's wings — top parts of the tips, that is.

"Mother preferred to make her wings from the top down," Paula explained, "whereas most people begin with the bottom of the wings." And all I'm thinking is how many twelve-year-olds use words like *whereas. Jeez!*

Anyhow, I was standing there at the scene, staring at the snow and the fence and not much else, when Normie Sellars runs up to me. "Where you been, Bell? You missed the best part, man." He was holding a jar of what looked like raspberry jelly.

I had to ask, "What's that?"

"Whaddaya mean 'what'? A souvenir," he said. "You should've come earlier, man. We all got some."

"What are you going to do with it?"

Normie snorted. "Man, what a dumb cluck! What do you think I'm gonna do with it? Put it in the freezer, ninny."

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By the end of the week, Mr. Fernshaw's wrought iron fence had been dug up. The old man wasn't happy; he had forged and hammered the fence himself right there in his garage, years before even my parents came to Dorrit Point. But that was the new law in town. No iron fences under six feet tall. And none at all with pointy parts.

The *Dorrit Point Weekly* (or *Weakly*, as my father called it) quoted Mayor Gaston as saying, "One dead angel is enough for any town." My mother had never liked Mayor Gaston. She liked him even less after that.

Paula churns up a mouthful of saliva. "That's the only sound my mother made. Just a funny little gurgle, like your tummy makes when you're hungry. She tried to get up, but she only made it worse for herself. For a moment, Scotty, it was as if she had a fountain smack in the middle of her neck. Her eyes never closed. I was the last sight she saw. I'm sure that made her happy. Especially my smile."

I think I am going to be sick. "You're lying." I can't look her in the face, no matter how cute she is. *How can she talk like that? About her own mother? Her own dead mother?* "You're a liar."

"Am I? Whatever."

"You're nuts."

"Killing people isn't really so difficult. You should try it, Scotty."

"Go away."

"The experience is really quite liberating. You'll feel you can do most anything — *heroisch*, as the Germans might say."

"But I don't want to kill my mother."

"You don't? Honest?"

"No, I don't."

"Mother love. How terribly quaint. You are a rare duck — perhaps even an endangered species."

The mourners move en masse from Fairweather & Baynes to the service at St. Pete's to the Canta house, up in the new development, the Heights.

My shoes pinch, my tie is too tight, my collar too stiff. I want to go home. I want to be as far from Paula Canta as I can be. But the post-funeral gathering continues and my mother has given no indication she will be leaving anytime soon. She and the other neighbor ladies are helping in the

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kitchen. One of the ladies is fixing her lipstick in the tea kettle. Another reclines on a chair, her head unhinged, teabags on her eyes. Another snips a leaf from a plant on the window sill, glances about to see if anyone has noticed, quickly wraps it in a napkin and slips it into her purse. Mr. Canta sits in the living room, his elbows on his knees, his chin on his fists. Not a moment passes without someone patting him somewhere. He nods often, and smiles a smile that doesn't seem to be a smile at all; whatever it is fades as quickly as it comes. I had always thought that people were supposed to act sad at funerals, but take Mr. Canta out of the picture and this is a party. And why, of all the people here, has Paula Canta chosen me to be the only one she talks to? "Shouldn't you be crying?" It is more accusation than question.

"Kill someone other than your momma then. I'm sure it will feel almost as good. Honestly, Scotty, these past few days have been the most exhilarating of my life."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I like you. All the girls like you. You're very handsome, Scotty Bell. You always will be."

I blush. "Shut up. Leave me alone. You're cuckoo."

"Even if you've never liked me, I have always liked you."

"I could tell on you."

"Yes, but you won't. I know you won't. That's why I told you. You're the only one who won't."

"What if I do?"

"Then I guess I'd have no alternative but to tell on you."

"But I haven't done anything."

"But you will, Scotty. I know you will."

"You should be crying. Your mother is dead. You should be crying."

"Fine," she snaps. "Fine." Her shoulders sag and her head drops into her hands. Her chest heaves, like my father's when he's having an asthma attack. And just like that, she's bawling. Eyes turn our way, as if they're expecting something of me. I'm not sure what the heck to do. I touch her shoulder, but it feels too weird, so I scratch my head instead. She watches me through welling pools of liquid brown, tears streaking her cheeks and wetting her smile, a smile only I can see. And it's not anything like her father's. Not even close. That's when she kisses me. She kisses me right

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on my lips. *God!* A big sloppy kiss. Worse yet, I'm kissing her too. *Jesus!* I jerk back, then up. *Jesus!* I wipe at the wet with the back of my hand, but it won't rub off. I can't get rid of the wet. And I'm trying. *Believe me, I'm trying.*

With my mother leading the charge, the kitchen ladies abandon their posts and come storming toward us, armed with Kleenex and consolation. *Can't they see what she just did to me? How can they not have seen?* My mother prods Paula up and into her arms while the others fuss, "There, there, dear. You poor, poor thing. There, there. There, there."

With the eye that isn't buried in my mother's titty, Paula watches as I steal away to the now vacant kitchen, her half-grin extending beyond my mother's sleeve and meant exclusively for me. She licks the corner of her smile.

What the heck is she? What the heck is the matter with her?

I want to prove Paula wrong. I want to squeal on her, pay her back for what she's dumped inside my head. But I am not sure what to say or how to say it.

I could tell my friends — Normie Sellars or Craig Decker, maybe — but they'll just end up doing something dumb, make everything worse. Dead moms aren't the sort of thing most guys get off on, anyhow.

I try to tell my mother, but she immediately derails my effort with a tearful lament over the late Mrs. Canta. "What a tragedy. She was so beautiful, so talented."

"But, Mom, Paula told me that — "

"That poor little girl. Can you imagine, losing your mother at such a young age, Scotty?"

I shake my head no, even though I can easily imagine it — more vividly than I ever could before. *Jesus! I'm standing over my mother's body with blood on my hands. Jesus!* There is no way I will bring up the subject again.

"That poor little girl. Imagine."

Jesus!

After the funeral, Paula and her father spend two weeks in Florida. When she returns to school in late January, I do my best to avoid her, but

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soon realize there is no need. She shows not the slightest interest in me as she goes about her business. *The business of being an egghead.* It is as if nothing has happened. Our relationship appears unchanged from before the funeral. I am relieved, of course. Even comforted. Perhaps she was only pulling my leg, after all. But then, as the weeks go by, something odd begins to happen. The more she doesn't talk to me, the more I want her to talk to me. And it's not just hormones raging here, it is something more. The more she doesn't talk to me, the more I want her to tell me things I should not know. It is as if she is bouncing a ball against the inside of my head, and I cannot get her to quit.

Every now and then, I skirt the perimeter of her space, hoping she might say something, wishing that I could. I've always found it easy to talk to girls — heck, the guys ask me for tips — but I cannot talk to this girl. Not her. Not Paula. Not anymore. I might as well be a brick in the wall of the school for all she seems to notice. I think she could walk right through me were she inclined to try.

BY APRIL, I have replayed Paula's confession a million times, at least, but her unwavering disregard of me only adds to my growing certainty that it was all baloney. Heck, I wouldn't be surprised if she's been embarrassed by it ever since she said it, reason enough to steer clear of me. Or maybe she doesn't remember saying anything to me at all. What if her mother's death caused her to go screwy in the head? That sort of stuff goes on all the time in movies. Somebody dies, somebody cracks. Anyhow, that's where my thinking is pretty much headed, until one recess the basketball ricochets off Normie Sellars's butt and I go chasing it down.

My eyes are on the ball, so I don't realize it has come to a rest at Paula Canta's Mary Janes, until she speaks. "Do you enjoy having me inside your head, Scotty?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

I gag some sort of response, but I'm not sure if it's a word in any dictionary. Or if it's a word at all.

"Well, do you?"

"What are you talking about?"

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"You don't like it, do you, Scotty? But I do. I am enjoying the inside of your head immensely."

"Shut up."

"You might as well get used to it; I'm going to be there for some time. We're a team, you know, you and me? We're going to do magnificent things together."

"Shut up."

"Surely, you don't mean that. You have been desperate for me to speak to you for months. And now you really want me to shut up? How terribly odd."

The guys are yelling at me to get a move on. I am holding up the game.

"Very well, then," Paula says, "since that is what you want."

"No, I — " But it is too late. I have been relegated yet again to brick-in-the-wall-of-the-school status. And then she relegates me further still to the wiles of my own imagination, and what was once a passing thought becomes a field day for the shrinks.

She walks right through me.

Not around me.

Not under me.

Not by me. But through.

Right through me.

And as she goes she kisses me. Kisses me from the inside out. I swear.

Feathers. My insides feel like feathers. Wet feathers.

I stumble about, the basketball mush in my hands, as if she's exited with my skeleton in tow. She carries on, extending the distance between us like she's in ballet class or something, her stay within me merely part of the routine. "Did you see?" I'm croaking to the guys, more than loud enough for her to hear. "Did you see?" But she doesn't turn back.

"Yeah, yeah, we see," taunts Normie Sellars. "We see an idiot named Scotty Bell." He grabs the ball and the guys herd me back onto the court.

From the sidelines, Annie McNeil and Jodi Dobrinski call to me. "Hi, Scotty," they say, in those sing-songy voices of theirs.

It was like I was the pillow case and she was the stuffing. *Holy friggin' cow!* Who the heck does she think she is, *Casper, the Friendly Ghost?* A ghost? Is that what she is? I crack up. "Stop laughing and start playing," chides Sellars. "What's the matter with you, anyhow?" *I'm a refugee from*

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a bad horror movie, that's what the matter is, idiot! Then again, just because I think it happened does not mean it did.

"Hi, Scotty," Annie McNeil and Jodi Dobrinski giggle again. I will get to touch the breasts of each — several times — before I graduate middle school. Jodi, in particular, will be instrumental in the fine-tuning of my French-kissing technique.

A year goes by. Another. (What can I tell you? You want the whole damn story, I'll write a book someday. For now, you're stuck with the *Reader's Digest* version.) I keep my distance, no matter how strong the yearnings. She cooperates in full, leaving me to wallow in my grand confusion. But I'm not the only guy who notices Paula now. Except their reasons are not entirely the same as mine. Craig Decker is typical. "So what if she's a brain, man, she's cute as hell."

Normie Sellars smacks his lips. "Nothing wrong with them boobs, neither."

Rumors spread. All the way to my mother. "I hear she's become quite the little flirt."

"I dunno," I say.

"Poor thing. That's what happens when you don't have a mother to guide you, to teach you right from wrong. Let's pray it's only a phase. Perhaps she's finally coming out of her shell. You don't recover from the loss of your mother overnight, you know, Scotty?"

My dad interrupts us. He's just gotten off the phone. His voice is shaky. "I just heard the most terrible news," he says.

"What?" My mother braces for the worst, her hand perched at mouth. I can swear I hear her tear ducts cranking open.

"Jack Runyon. He just shot Viv. Over at the hairdresser."

"Vivian. My God!" my mother cries.

"She was sitting under the dryer, reading *McCall's*. And then he went and blew his own head off."

I guess Jack Runyon must have come out of his shell, too, I think.

To the surprise of no one, Paula Canta is middle school valedictorian. Her metamorphosis is pretty much complete. No trace of her *egghead* days remains, not even a bit of shell. But the look is nothing new to me.

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How pretty she was on the day of her mother's funeral, in that puffy black dress with white frills on the sleeves, her dark hair in pigtails, a shiny black ribbon around each. She is bubbly and funny, dramatic and captivating, welcome relief from the teachers and local officials who droned on before her. "Man, she gets hotter every day," Craig Decker whispers in my ear.

One moment she has the whole place laughing, the next cheering. Except me. I'm sitting on my hands. Listening. Waiting for her to screw everybody else's brains just like she's screwed with mine. Heck, the way they're carrying on you'd think she's Kareem Abdul Jabbar or somebody. And then — get this! — she brings her mother into it. She tells us how meaningful this day would have been to her mother, and how much she misses her, especially — get this! — when she practices her clarinet. And then she pulls the damn thing out from under the podium and starts playing some hymn or something she introduces with, "My mother's favorite." But as she's playing and the room is sniffling — especially the moms and dads gathered in the rows behind us — she zeroes in on me. I slouch as low as I can without hitting the floor. I focus on my shoelaces. There is no way I'm going to meet her gaze. But I don't need to. "I killed her, Scotty," she says, just like that, in front of the entire school. I am amazed. I am overjoyed. She has confessed, at last. And the secret is no longer mine alone. Best of all, she says it again, even louder: "I killed her, Scotty." Only thing I can't figure out is why nobody is doing anything about her. The sniffling is going strong. That's when it hits me, she hasn't skipped a beat. Never once has the clarinet left her lips. *Cripes!* She's back inside my head. "I killed her, Scotty."

I shoot to my feet. "Shut up!" I holler. "Just shut your mouth." *Oh, man! I have really lost it now.* A hush floods the auditorium. Paula's clarinet turns sour, frozen at her mouth, her fingers crooked above the keys.

Somebody tugs at my gown from behind. "Are you nuts, man? Sit down." Beside me, Craig Decker tugs too.

"Sorry," I mumble. "It was an accident."

Mr. Conway, the gym teacher, and Mrs. Ladino, the principal, rush to the end of my aisle. They motion for me to join them, their actions compact and restrained, as if this makes them less conspicuous.

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Sobbing, Paula lowers the clarinet. Assorted teachers and officials bombard her with comfort. Her father rushes to the stage, his fist vowing vengeance to me as he leaps up the steps. Close behind is my mother, a wad of Kleenex in hand; she shakes her head at me, disappointed, crushed by what I've done, her hand at her throat. Guilt scalds my cheeks, my forehead, and then: "I killed her, Scotty." "Shut up!" I shout again. A hush descends upon the hush.

I am escorted to the rear of the auditorium, Mr. Conway and Mr. Longacre, the science teacher, posted to either side of me. "What the devil has got into you, boy?" Mr. Conway wants to know. "That's not like you, Bell."

Paula composes herself. She plays the last eight bars or so of whatever it is she's been playing and then completes her speech, capping it with some cornball message about overcoming adversity, underscored by a forgiving glare in my direction. Three hundred heads turn to get a glimpse of me, to see if I am sufficiently contrite. I pretend to be.

When she finishes, everybody pretty much goes nuts. And all I'm thinking is how I've beat them all to it.

I win two trophies, one for basketball and another for baseball. I also receive some kind of award for school spirit; it comes with a check for a hundred bucks. But I am not permitted to go up on stage to collect. My achievements and my diploma are delivered without ceremony to my seat.

A couple of days later, I am put on Ritalin. *Whatever makes them happy.* (Not that I was alone in that regard. There were so many of us being put on the junk back then, the PTA had every school in the district checked out for lead in the water fountains and asbestos and some other crap called urea formaldehyde in the walls and ceilings. Something had to be causing all this craziness, they figured. Something tangible, they hoped.)

Three months into high school, my grades are in the toilet. "You were on the Honor Roll, Scotty. Now you're barely getting by. You're not yourself, sweetheart." No kidding.

My parents are desperate to find out what's going on. Psychologists. Psychiatrists. Specialists in this. Specialists in that. I run the therapeutic gauntlet. They think they can see inside my head, but not one of them spots Paula.

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I'm taken off Ritalin and put on Surmontil. I'm taken off Surmontil and put on Sinequan. I'm taken off Sinequan and put back on Ritalin.

My mother scours my room for drugs. Weekly. (My prescriptions don't count.) She rummages my school books, my backpack, my papers, my closet, my drawers.

My father quizzes me as to whether I am sexually active with girls or, God forbid, boys. "You would tell me, wouldn't you, son, if, if, if — ? I don't want you ending up like that Tremblay boy or something...." Everybody in Dorrit Point knew about Maury Tremblay over on Summerfield Road, his secret cellar, and the three young boys he kept there (all plucked fresh from the streets of Detroit), until his Grandma got new batteries for her hearing aid and found him out.

Together, they lecture me on drug and alcohol abuse and promise to help me in any way possible, if I'll only tell them what is troubling me. "There's no shame in asking for help, Scotty. No shame in that at all."

They screen my phone calls, interrogate my friends, call the school to verify that I am in class, meet with my teachers, the guidance counselors, the principal.

Once, I overhear them on the phone with Paula. I put the pieces of the conversation together. "I hardly know him," I figure she's telling them. "We've spoken only two or three times, I think, in all our years of school. Not counting my mother's funeral, of course."

"Your mother was a wonderful lady. Sorry to bother you, dear."

"That's okay, Mrs. Bell. I wish I could help. He was always a very nice boy."

They threaten to take away my sports, but the high school needs all the help it can get, especially since Wiley "Big Gun" Gunderson was sent up to IYC — the Iverson Youth Correctional Center — for attempted rape. Besides, every professional they speak to advises against it — except for the jerk who lived outside the county. "A Fullerton Vikings supporter," my father scoffs.

On the bright side, I've still got friends — more than ever, really — and girls continue to like me, thank God. Guys on the team have dubbed me M.K., short for Makeout King. Meanwhile, Paula hasn't spoken to me since middle school graduation. Like before, I am her Invisible Man. And like before, I begin to waver, doubting my own sanity, wondering if any of

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it has been real, if demonizing Paula hasn't been a unilateral effort. Going crazy happens to kids my age all the time — Wiley "Big Gun" Gunderson, a case in point. But, once again, just when I have reached the point of absolving Paula altogether, she comes to my rescue, affirming the sanity of my insanity.

At the end of our sophomore year, our trays tap in the cafeteria, sending tremors through our respective Jell-Os. Both green. Mine with whipped cream, hers without. I venture a quiet hello. I want her to hear, but I am hoping she will not. It is a test, of course. If she passes, I fail. If she fails, I still fail.

Paula speaks without turning. "I assume this means you finally have something to tell me? You have been such a disappointment."

"Huh?"

"What is it you want?"

"I was just saying 'hi,' that's all."

"So then you don't have anything to tell me?"

"I don't know what you want me to say."

"You know exactly what I want to hear."

I rack my brain. "I'm sorry?"

"Is that a question or an apology?"

I gulp. "I'm sorry about the graduation thing, if that's what you mean. I don't know what got into me."

"Really? You don't know? After all this time, you still don't know?"

"I don't."

"What got into you, Scotty Bell, was me. And you can be absolutely certain, I am still there."

"Let's just forget it, okay? Forget I said anything. I was just trying to be nice, that's all, and you — "

"You are absolutely hopeless. By now I thought you'd be so much further along. Craig Decker has been killing cats and dogs. And Normie Sellars, he's totally into guns. But you — you — " She has yet to glance my way, while I have yet to take my eyes from her. She places a carton of chocolate milk on her tray. "When Mrs. Bannister died last autumn, I was hoping, at last, you had something to do with it. She was such a nasty bitch. Not a terribly erudite history teacher, either — and absolutely horrid toward you. How you put up with her repeated humiliations in

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class I will never know. But then I heard it was cancer, and I knew that was far too sophisticated for you. You don't know how to give people cancer, do you, Scotty?"

I shake my head.

"No, I didn't think you did. Not yet, anyhow."

I lay my hand on her shoulder, turn her to face me. She's staring at my lips and I'm staring at hers, but then she spots some guy across the cafeteria — that jerk Rodney Steen — and leaves me in her wake. She does not walk through me, a courtesy for which I am truly grateful. I watch as she kisses the prick. She's always kissing somebody these days, it seems, except me. I wonder what a kiss from her would be like, now that I know how to kiss, though I can't for the life of me understand why I'd bother to wonder such a thing.

That night, a Tuesday night, I grab my baseball bat, walk three streets over and smash out the headlights of a BMW. Just like that.

AS MY SENIOR YEAR winds down, I win a baseball scholarship to USC, despite less than stellar grades. Coach Murchison tells me they love the way I swing a bat and the way I pick them out of the dirt at first. "You got soft hands, son, soft hands."

In that same week, my old friend Craig Decker runs his graduation pickup over Normie Sellars's dog; he also takes out Normie Sellars's mom, who is walking the dog. Normie chases Craig down, shoots him dead, and bashes in his face with the rifle butt.

"What a tragedy," my mother weeps. "They were such nice boys. When you were little, Scotty, you were such good pals — the three of you."

"Yeah. We were." I try to remember when we stopped being pals and why, but I can't come up with anything specific. We went our separate ways, that's all; high school does that a lot to kids. Funny thing is, this is the first time I can recall thinking about us not being friends.

"It's getting worse around here every day," says my dad. Increasingly the bearer of bad tidings, he presents his latest gem. "And did you hear what some idiot did to your old gym teacher, this afternoon, Scotty?"

"Mr. Conway?"

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"A quarter-inch either way and the doctors say the knife would have killed him."

"Who would've — ?"

"Some girl. A student. I don't know. Can you imagine, a girl?"

"It frightens me," Mom says, her shudder redundant.

"Sign of the times," laments Dad. "All that trash on television, the movies...."

"And that music," Mom adds. "That music is hateful."

"Maybe it'll all get better around here after Paula Canta goes off to college," I say.

They turn my way. I shrug, sheepish. They do not know why I would say such a thing; I do not know why either.

My second funeral is Craig Decker's. I catch a flat on the way to the church. By the time I dig out the jack, best I can manage is the cemetery. I arrive as they are putting him into the ground. Only when Paula wraps herself around my upper arm do I realize I have chosen to stand next to her. "A shame it didn't go the other way," she whispers, "Craig was a vastly superior lay."

I try to shake her off, but I've learned my lesson about making scenes.

"At the very least, you might as well give them the impression you are consoling me," she says, her cheek against my shoulder.

"Go away. Please."

"And if I choose not to, what are you going to do? Rape me? Stab me? Run me over? Or is shooting more your style? In all honesty, Scotty, you don't really want me to go away. After all, aren't I the girl of your dreams?"

"The best part about going off to school is not having to see you anymore. You're crazy, Paula. You've always been crazy."

"We have a lot in common then."

"Up yours!" A mourner turns, hushes me. I mumble an apology. My mother glances toward us from graveside. My father frowns. I lower my head. Paula offers up a mournful smile. My mother waves to her.

Next night, on the fringes of Fullerton, I lay waste to every shitbox in sight. A good thirty or forty. Mostly Fords, Chryslers, Chevys, Pontiacs. A lot of that crap in Fullerton.

* * *

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Fairweather & Baynes Funeral Home moves from Seymour Street to a whole new building up in the Heights. Looks like one of those plantation mansions you see in Civil War movies. Big white pillars. The works. Anyhow, they put a picture of Mayor Gaston cutting the ribbon on the front page of the *Weekly*. He says, "Few towns of comparable size can boast a more efficient mortuary service. It is yet the latest feather in our community's hat." After that, my mother tries to cancel our subscription, but the paper is free and continues to be delivered without interruption.

ALL SUMMER LONG, I ached for what the shrinks call closure; nonetheless, I stayed well out of her way. If I could just get to Labor Day, get on that plane to California, I figured everything would work out. Out of sight, out of mind — that sort of reasoning. And I guess I might have made it, too, had I not gone to Jodi Dobrinski's party. Dumb of me, I know, but it was going to be a long time before I'd have another chance to see most of my friends again — the surviving ones, anyhow. Besides, Ernie Yawker was throwing a bash, too, and last I heard he and Paula were into it hot and heavy. I put the odds of her showing up at Jodi's as slim.

I was two beers in before I spotted her. She was on the sofa under some guy who wasn't Ernie Yawker. She wore denim cutoffs and a pink tank top. Her long dark hair was tied back in a ponytail that wasn't going to be a ponytail much longer. I debated clearing out altogether, but settled for putting the bodies on the dance floor between us. I was keeping my distance, watching the two of them go at it, when Jodi sidled up, and patted me on the back. She had to shout to be heard above the music. "Poor, poor Scotty, after all these years, you still have a thing for her, don't you?"

I had to shout, too. "Do not."

"Right. Then you must be the only one who doesn't know it."

Just as the music stopped, I piped up, "I hate her." Perfect timing as usual. The whole room cracked up. But Scotty Bell doing something stupid was hardly a novelty and my entertainment value lasted only as long as it took the next song to cue up.

"Come to think of it," Jodi continued, "you must be about the only guy in our class she's never made it with."

"And that's the way it's going to stay."

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"Really?" Jodi laughed. "Guess again, lover boy." Paula was wending her way through the dancers, heading straight for me. Her hair now fell about bare shoulders, all soft and springy — like she was coming at me fresh from a shampoo commercial. The place was mobbed. Best I could do was squeeze up against a wall and hope she'd lose sight of me. But she didn't stop till her nose was in my chest.

She stood there, wobbling a bit, sizing me up, lips wet, eyelids lowered. She looked sexy, and kind of goofy, too. I threw up my hands. "What? What now? How you gonna screw with my head this time?" Next I knew she was holding my face and her tongue was wrestling with my tonsils.

She'd been drinking and might've been stoned, too, considering all the weed being passed about. "You're drunk," I said, in an effort to fend her off. (Okay, so it wasn't much of an effort.)

"Lucky you," she replied. She couldn't get enough of me. She was sucking face so damn hard, I licked my lips for blood; all I tasted was strawberry wine and Paula Canta.

We ended up in Jodi's bedroom, no protest from me. As long as Paula didn't use that mouth of hers for talking, she was something to behold. *She couldn't get enough of me*? Hell, I couldn't get enough of her. I couldn't care less she was pissed, I was going to make the most of the opportunity. For years, she'd been jerking me up and down like a catcher's mask. She owed me, and I saw no harm in collecting. I suppose we could have kept it up all night, if Paula wouldn't have started to blubber. *Yeah, blubber.*

Tears were the last thing I expected of her. She was setting me up, I was sure. But if there was anything I'd learned in the years since her mother's passing, it was that no matter how much deeper it might get you, a guy is always expected to ask, "What's the matter? What's wrong?"

"You," she sniffed, and rolled off my chest to the side. "You're hard work, Scotty Bell."

"I'm hard work? Then what are you?" I said. She laughed; it rang warm, genuine and out of character. I loved it. Wanted more.

I held her close, the salt of her tears on my tongue. Whatever defenses she had mustered against me were coming down, or so I thought. I admit, her vulnerability added to the turn-on. "You've exhausted me," she sobbed, gasping so much it took several tries before all the words got out

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and another couple before I could make out what she was saying. Then she added, "But I think today — today should finally do it."

"Do it? Do what?"

"Do you in," she purred.

I groaned, tensed the arm that held her. *Here we go again.* "Don't tell me you've got AIDS or something? Cripes, Paula...."

She softened, pecked me reassuringly. "No, not quite. It's just that you've always been so frightened of me and...."

"Have not."

"Of course, you have. I would be, too, if I were twelve and someone told me they had just killed their mother."

"But you didn't really, did you?"

"I knew the fence was there, Scotty. Mother knew it was, too. At least, in her heart she did."

"So you didn't kill her then? And all this time I...."

"Oh, but I did, Scotty. I did kill her. More often than not, suicide is simply murder by proxy."

"You really should get help. I mean, if you think that...."

"I have all the help I need. I'm lying here with you, aren't I?"

"We're a pair, all right." I pulled her closer. "You're going to think this is really nuts, but I used to think you were a ghost."

"Pardon me?"

"Remember that day in the schoolyard, when I ran down the ball? I could've sworn you walked through me. It was so weird, I could've — "

"Perhaps I did."

"Yeah. Right."

"Think about it, Scotty, all the sorts of things that can pass right through a person. A sound. A chill...."

"A bullet," I said.

"...Feelings. Fears. A stare. A glare. And all those nasty bugs and germs...bacteria and viruses...and God-knows-what."

"And which, Paula — which one are you?"

She nipped me on the earlobe. "Take your pick," she said. And then I guess she pretty much passed out. I wasn't feeling all that great myself, mixing meds with booze and such. Anyhow, I thought it best to let her sleep it off.

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* * *

Paula goes east and I go west. There is no further contact between us. Not a phone call. Not a postcard. Not an e-mail. Not regards passed on by a mutual acquaintance. Yet not a day goes by that I do not see her.

She is with me when I go to bed, with me when I wake up.

I graduate university, kick around the minors for a couple of seasons, get a real job, marry Laura, father two daughters, vandalize more cars, get another job, divorce, and struggle with the fact that the life I strive to lead is always secondary to the life that possesses me.

I see her at eighteen and nineteen and twenty. Make no mistake, I am not speaking in any figurative way.

I see her at twenty-six and twenty-seven and twenty-eight. Always, she is inside my head, as plainly as if she were standing before me.

I see her at thirty-three and thirty-four and thirty-five. Always, I know exactly what she looks like, how she has aged.

They say I waited for her in the lobby, followed her up to her room, but that's not the way it happened at all.

She taps the table with a manicured fingernail, as red as the wine in the glass before her. "Is this a coincidence or are you stalking me?"

"Stalking," I tell her.

"Same old Scotty Bell," she smiles, "as blunt as ever." With the toe of her black leather pump, she turns a vacant chair toward me. "Well, are you going to stand there staring the whole evening, or are you going to join me?"

"I can't," I say.

"Don't tell me you're still afraid of me — not after all these years?"

"No, of course not. It's Tuesday. I'm busy Tuesday nights."

"Really? Too busy for a drink with an old friend?"

"I hardly think of you as that," I correct her.

She feigns injury. "Haven't you learned by now, Scotty, people from your past are always old friends when you encounter them, even if they never actually were?" Her finger traces the rim of her glass. "'Give me a bowl of wine. In this I bury all unkindness.'"

"What?"

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"It's Shakespeare."

"Oh." Every man who passes glances her way, some more shamelessly than others. But she pays them no heed; she is accustomed to it. I hate hotel bars. Every gesture is foreplay.

"I'm here with the Symphony," she says.

"Yes, I know. The Internet filled me in. It's how I found you."

"Then you also know about the clarinet." Her sheepishness is more coy than sincere. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"To say the least."

"Mother would be so proud."

"You haven't changed."

"You're making my neck ache. It would be so much easier if you would simply sit, Scotty."

I shake my head, check the time. "I smash cars."

"Pardon me?"

I take the seat. "On Tuesday nights, I smash cars. Been doing it since high school."

"Really?" Her eyes light up. "And people — people, too?" she asks eagerly

"Just cars."

She is disappointed. "Are you certain?"

"Pretty much."

"What about your parents? Still alive?"

"Yes. In Florida. West Palm." Again, I have disappointed her.

"Funny, I had such high hopes for you. I always had you pegged for a parricide, at the very least."

"Parricide?"

"A parent killer." *She* was saying this to me. Imagine. *Her.* To me.

"And your dad?" I ask.

"He'll be gone ten years this May. Heart disease."

"I'm sorry, Paula."

"Don't be. Ever since Mother passed on, he was a most dreadful mope. I'd had enough." She laughs. "So tell me, are you in Boston on business or strictly to drive a stake through my heart?"

The question catches me off guard. "So you know then?"

"It is rather obvious. What was it I kissed you — two, three times?"

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"Three, counting that inside-out one in the schoolyard."

"Oh, yes. And even with that you progressed no further than petty vandalism? Yes, I'd say it's quite clear what you are — or what you think you are."

"Then why aren't you running from me? Why aren't you screaming for help?"

"Call me a cockeyed optimist, darling, but I still hold out hope the result may go the other way. Perhaps our fourth kiss will do the trick. Perhaps tomorrow, you'll fly down to Florida and give your parents a big hug and a kiss from me."

Again, I glance at my watch.

She sighs. "Well, I guess we might as well get on with it. You were a rather adept lover as I recall." She signals the barkeep, orders a bottle of Pinot Noir. I order a Sam Adams.

"Cheers," she says, as she taps her glass against mine. "To us."

"To us," I repeat, and I lean across the table and kiss her full on the mouth.

"You kiss like a married man, Scotty. You're so desperate for something different."

"Just hungry," I tell her. "It's been a while since the divorce."

"Stability never was your strong suit."

"Thanks to you."

"Touché."

"How many kisses do you think it will take?" I ask her.

"To see who wins?"

"Yeah, I guess."

She continues to find me amusing. "I hardly think we'll stop at kisses, dear boy." And all I'm thinking is how beautiful she is, even when she's patronizing.

Sometime after midnight, I head over to Brookline, in a Mercedes kind of mood.

I still can't believe the people they trotted out, the nonsense they had to say about me.

Some shrink. "Such behavior is inevitably linked to a form of

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psychopathology — psychosis, severe antisocial personality disorder, and the like. Violence is in no way atypical, occurring in some twenty-five percent of cases, murder in roughly two percent."

Some cop. "Two priors. Both vandalism. The guy likes smashing up cars, that's for sure."

Annie McNeil. "I wasn't surprised when I heard, only surprised it hadn't happened sooner. All the girls liked Scotty — he was so cute — but he always had this special thing for Paula, going way back to middle school, I think."

Jodi Dobrinski. "She was drunk out of her mind, but somehow he got her up to my bedroom. She was a mess, just lying there when we found her. We all told her to press charges, but she was going off to school the next day or so and just wanted to leave the whole thing behind her."

My mother. "Surely, losing your mother at so young an age must have an effect. I heard stories about her being a little wild with the boys. Perhaps she led him on in some way. Scotty was always very impressionable."

My dad. "We got him all kinds of help. I don't care what you say, it was the system that let him down. Nothing's the way it used to be. The movies. That noise they call music. Everybody's got an attitude — a chip on their shoulder. He was a good boy. He could've played in the Bigs."

Laura. "He never raised a hand to me or the children. Still, when he was with us, he never seemed to be with us, if you know what I mean."

Had they bothered to shut up and listen, I would have told them the truth. But they were all so full of themselves, so damn certain they had me nailed, the truth wouldn't have done me a lick of good. Besides, the way I size it up, Paula had to have been incubating inside more than a few of them by then, with stuff like stealing, maiming, raping, murder, and blowing crap up just around their respective corners. Smashing, too, no doubt.

The whole thing is so simple, really. Too simple, I suppose. Paula Canta was the virus, Scotty Bell was the vaccine.

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One of our most popular stories from last year was "The Measure of All Things" (Jan. 2001), in which Richard Chwedyk introduced us to the saurs—toy dinosaurs that turned out to be more than anyone expected. Now, after too long an absence, the crew of unwanted pets return to our pages with a remarkable tale of unexpected gifts, giant robots, and things from beyond. Take the phone off the hook before you start reading this one; it's the sort of story that's ideal for curling up with and interruptions will surely be unwelcome.

Bronte's Egg

By Richard Chwedyk

THERE IS AN OLD HOUSE AT the edge of the woods about sixty kilometers out from the extremes of the nearest megalopolis. It was built in another century and resembles the architecture of the century before that one. In some ways it evokes the end of many things: the end of the road, the end of a time, the end of a search (which the house has been, and on occasion it still is). But it is also a good place for beginnings, a good place to begin a story about beginnings — as good as any and better than most.

And it began at dawn.

As the first hint of daylight entered the large second floor bedroom where the saurs slept in a great pile, Axel opened his eyes and whispered, "Yeah!"

There was *stuff* to do and he was ready.

He pulled himself out from under Agnes's spiked tail and Rosie's bony crest and horns, then over Charlie's big rear end, almost stepping into Pierrot's gaping mouth. He pressed, prodded, and pushed his way until he could lift up the blanket and make a straight dash to the window. He

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hopped onto a wooden stool and from there climbed up another step to the box-seated window ledge. His little blue head moved left to right like a rolling turret as he stared out at the wall of trees past the yard, silhouetted against the brightening sky.

The *sun* is coming! And the sun is a *star!* And it's spinning through *space!* And *we're* spinning through space around the sun! And — there's *stuff* to do!

"Stuff to do!" he whispered, hopped back to the stool and then to the floor.

Axel looked back at the sleep-pile. It was a great, blanket-covered mound. Except for the breathing, a few grumbled syllables and occasional twitches, none of the other saurs stirred. They were good sleepers for the most part — all but Axel. Axel could run about all day long from one end of the old Victorian house to the other, and when sleep time came and the saurs gathered themselves into a pile, he would shut his eyes — but nothing happened. His *mind* kept running. Even when he did manage to drift off, his dreams were of running, of traveling in speeding vehicles, like interstellar cruisers. And even if *he* wasn't moving, he dreamed of motion, of stars and planets and asteroids, of winds and birds and leaves in autumn. The whole universe was whirling and spinning like an enormous amusement park ride.

He'd been to an amusement park once, so long ago he couldn't distinguish it anymore from the rest of life.

He had no need to creep out of the room. The thump-thump-thump of his big padded feet disturbed no one. His tail in the air didn't make a sound. He ran past the room of the big human, Tom Groverton. The human ran and ran all day long too, cleaning and feeding and keeping the saurs out of trouble — but he got tired and slept almost as hard as the saurs.

Axel headed down to the first floor. Descending human stairs should have been difficult for a bipedal creature only forty centimeters tall, but he flew down them with ease. There were *so* many things to do today! The universe was so big — that is, *sooooo* big! How could anyone just lie about when the sky was already lighting up the world?

No way! Axel thumped the floor with his tail. Space and Time and Time and Space! The Universe is one big place!

He'd learned that from the computer.

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The computer was on a desk in the dining room, or what had been the dining room when the house was just a place for humans, before it became a shelter for the saurs. The desk sat over by the east-facing window. The computer was old in many respects, but the old computers were often more easily upgraded, and as long as they were linked to all the marvelous systems out there in the world past the porch and the yard, there was nothing this old model couldn't do.

"Yeah!"

Axel rolled a set of plastic steps up to the desk and dashed straight up until he stood before the huge gray monitor — huge to Axel, at least.

"Hey! Reggie!" Axel addressed the computer by name.

The computer could be voice-activated and voice-actuated. The brain box chirped at Axel's greeting and the screen came to life. Icons were displayed in the corners and along the top, one of them being the Reggiesystems icon: "Reggie" himself, the light green seahorse-or-baby-sea-serpent thing, with its round black eyes and orange wattle that drooped down his jaw like a handlebar mustache.

The icon dropped to the center of the screen and grew until it was almost half the height of the screen. The figure of Reggie rotated from profile to head-on and in a smooth, slightly androgynous voice he spoke:

"Reggie is ready."

"Hiya!" Axel waved a forepaw and smiled, mouth opened wide, revealing all his tiny, thorn-like teeth.

"Good morning, Axel," said Reggie. "What can Reggie do for you today?" Reggie always referred to himself in the third person.

"A whole bunch of stuff!" Axel stretched his forepaws far apart. "Important stuff! Fate of the universe stuff! Really truly big important stuff!" His head bobbed with each exclamation.

"Where would you like to begin?" Reggie said with patience.

Axel looked sharply to one side, then the other. "Don't know! I forgot. Wait!" He nodded vigorously. "The screensaver! Show me the screensaver!"

The icon's head seemed to jiggle slightly, affirmatively, as if acknowledging the request. Reggie disappeared and the screen darkened to black. Axel drew his paws together in anticipation.

A bright speck appeared in the center of the darkness. It grew until it

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flickered gently, like a star, then grew some more until it looked as big as the sun.

It *was* the sun — as it might look if you were flying through space, directly toward it. It filled the screen until it seemed you were in imminent danger of crashing right into it.

"Aaaaaaaahh!" Axel screamed with delight.

The sun moved off to the right corner of the screen, as if you were veering away and passing it by. Darkness again. Another bright speck started to grow in the screen's center: Mercury, the closest planet to the sun. It was followed by Venus, then the Earth, and Mars, and Jupiter — all the way through the solar system until a pudgy oblong bump rolled past odd-wise and all that was left on the screen were hundreds, thousands of bright specks, changing their positions at differing speeds, as you might see them if you were flying through space.

"Yeah!" cried Axel. "*Yeah!!*"

Through the haze of the Oort Cloud, then out past the solar system, the stars kept coming and coming until you could make out a bright little smudge, like a smeared thumbprint in luminous paint.

It was a galaxy! Another galaxy!

"Yeah!" shouted Axel. "Yeah yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah YEAH!"

The galaxy grew in size until you could just about make out some of the more individuated members of the star cluster. Axel cheered them on.

"Yes! Galaxies! Let's *go!*"

The screensaver cycle was over and it was back to the beginning: the little speck grows into the sun, then the planets, then the far off galaxy —

Axel watched it all again, and then one more time before Reggie interrupted his reverie.

"There was something else you wished Reggie to do?"

"Ohhhh. That's-right that's-right that's-right!" Axel kept his eyes on the moving stars. He remembered someone from the dream he'd had during his brief sleep: he couldn't remember who, but it was someone he wanted to talk to. "I gotta send a message!"

"And where do you wish to send the message?"

Still looking at the screensaver, he said, "To *space!*"

Reggie took an instant longer than usual to reply. "Space, as an

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address, is not very specific. Are there any particular coordinates in space to which you wish your message directed?"

"What are coordinates?" Axel kept looking at the stars.

The screensaver blinked away. In its place appeared numbers from top to bottom: numbers with decimal points and superscripted degree signs —

"Coordinates," Reggie said, "are a way to divide space by increments, so that one can more accurately determine which part of space one is looking at or to which section one might want to direct a message."

"Ohhhhh."

Reggie scrolled the numbers upward. Axel gaped at them, partly perplexed at the notion of numbers as directions, partly in awe at the sheer volume of them. Numbers, decimal points, degree signs — space was threatening to become an impenetrable wall of numbers. If he thought about it any more his head would heat up and explode.

"That one!" Axel pointed with his left forepaw. "I'll take that one!"

The numbers stopped scrolling. "Which one?" asked Reggie.

"*That* one!" He pressed the forepaw to the glass screen, then tapped against it adamantly.

The numbers were so small — and his forepaw so big in comparison — that Reggie could still not discern which coordinate Axel had chosen. Reggie highlighted one of the numbers in bright red.

"This one?"

"Yeah! That's it!" In truth it wasn't. But the red highlighting was distracting to Axel, whose choice of number was already purely arbitrary. Facing a wall of numbers, one seemed as good as another. "Send it there!"

"What kind of message?" Reggie asked. "Vocal? Alphabetical characters? Equations?"

"Like, maybe radio," Axel said. "Or whatever you've got that's faster, like micro-tachy-tot waves, or super-hydro-electro-neutrinos."

"One moment," said Reggie. "At what frequency?"

"Frequency? Just once is okay." He rubbed a little spot just under his jaw.

A machine, even one as sophisticated as this Reggiesystems model, is not given to sighing, though one might imagine this model had many occasions to do so. What Reggie did was increase his pauses and slow down his speech delivery.

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"What is meant by 'frequency,' Axel — " Reggie explained it all carefully. Axel faced another wall of numbers and made another choice — exactly the same way he'd made the first.

The numbers disappeared and the screensaver images returned. Axel watched it as avidly as if he'd never seen them before.

"Reggie has reserved time on the radio telescope at Mount Herrmann. The message can be sent at 13:47 our time this afternoon, when their first shift team breaks for lunch."

"Wow!" Axel's head reared back. "Thank you, Reggie. Thank-you-thank-you-thank-you!"

"Reggie still needs one more piece of information."

"What's that?"

Very slowly, Reggie said, "The *message*, please."

"Oh, right!" Axel tried to remember the message he'd worked out during the night, as he'd peeked out from under the blankets and stared out through the window — at the rectangle of indigo speckled with pinpoints of light — and imagined all the "space guys" out there. Space and Time and Time and Space — They might look like Axel: blue theropods with coal-black eyes, tiny forepaws, and clumpy feet — but without the long scar down his back; or they might look like one of the other saurs — miniature tyrannosaurs or ceratopsians or long-necked sauropods or crested hadrosaurs. Or they might look like human guys, or birds, or jellyfish, or clouds —

"What is the message?" Reggie asked.

"Okay-okay-okay. The message — " Axel held out the last syllable as long as he could to buy a little more time. " — is — it's — 'Hiya!'"

"That is the message?"

"Yeah."

"The *complete* message?" Reggie didn't often emphasize his adjectives that way.

"I don't know. Is that enough? What else should I say?"

Reggie paused long enough to formulate an appropriate answer. "You may say as much or as little as you like, but it is customary to tell the recipient of a message who you are."

"Why?"

It might just have been a function of the old hard drive (technology

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had long since moved past the use of them), but Axel heard a strange, almost nervous, clicking coming from inside the brain box.

"Because the recipient might possibly — for some reason completely unknown to Reggie — want to send a message back to you, in reply."

"Heyyy — " Axel imagined the screensaver running backward — you could do that if you looked at it hard enough — back through space the other way. "Space guys! Yeah!"

"You may also want to tell them a little about yourself," Reggie suggested. "Where you live. What you do. Where you come from — just to be friendly."

"Ohhh! Yes! Got it! Yes! I can say — 'Hiya! I'm Axel, and I live in this big house and I'm here with all my friends. We're saurs, you know, all of us except for the human who brings us food and cleans up stuff. His name is Tom. But we're saurs!

"'Saurs are like dinosaurs. They were these really big guys who lived a long time ago and went extinct. We're supposed to look like them except we're smaller and we don't have the scary parts.

"'We came from a factory that was like a laboratory too, and we were made out of living stuff — you know, biology.

"'They made millions of us and sold us to humans as toys. All these human guys who made us made big, big money and drove around in giant bankmobiles and wore top hats and had houses a *thousand* times bigger than this place. But then they had to stop selling us.

"'Turned out we were smarter than we were supposed to be, and lived longer. This lady from the Atherton Foundation said we weren't toys at all but real-real-*real* things that were alive and they shouldn't be selling us.

"'But we kept getting cut up and run over, or the kids who owned us stepped on us or threw us out of windows. Or the parents who bought us drove us to the woods and left us there — or they stopped feeding us and stuff like that. So after a while there weren't many of us left.

"'People started to believe the Atherton lady. They set up a bunch of houses for us and that's how we got to live here.

"'We do all sorts of stuff the guys who made us didn't think we could do, like think and feel and live longer than three years. My buddy Preston writes books. My other buddy Diogenes reads all the stuff in the library. And the Five Wise Buddhasaurs, who don't say anything but they play this

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stuff that sounds like music sometimes. And Agnes is this stegosaur with plates on her back and spikes on her tail and she knows all about humans and what's wrong with them. She's twenty-five years old, so she must know *everything*. Doc is smart too, but he's nice!

"'The guys who made us said we couldn't make eggs because we don't have the right parts and stuff, but we can do *that* too! Not me, but like Bronte and Kara — female guys. The humans aren't supposed to know, except for Tom and Dr. Margaret — she's the lady who comes every week to make sure we're not sick or dead. I'm not supposed to know either because they think I can't keep a secret, so don't tell the other space guys about this, okay?

"'And when I finish this message, I'm gonna build Rotomotoman. He's this cool robot I dreamed about last night. Reggie's gonna help me, because Reggie's the very-best-smartest whole computer in the world. Then I'm gonna get on a starship and travel all through time and space and save the universe and crash into supernovas and get sucked into wormholes.'"

Axel took a long, necessary breath, then said to Reggie, "Is that okay?"

"Under the circumstances," Reggie said, "Your message is — exceptional."

"Wow!"

"It is, however, customary to ask after the well-being of the recipient of the message, and to close the message — "

"Oh, oh, I know! I know! So I'll say, 'Hope you're okay. Your friend, Axel.' Like that, right?"

"The message will be sent as you dictated it," Reggie replied, "with a few grammatical corrections."

"All *right!*" Axel leapt up. "A message to space! Thank you, Reggie! Oh, thank-you-thank-you-thank-you-thank-you!"

"You are very welcome, Axel," said Reggie. Then, with what one might interpret as a trepidatious pause — and with careful attention to pronunciation — he asked, "Now, please explain to Reggie, what is a Ro-to-mo-to-man?"

Tom Groverton stood at the door of the room where the saurs slept. Eyes half open, hair still mussed, a middle button of his shirt undone, he

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said the word "breakfast" clearly but not too loudly and stepped back as the little ones ran past him.

The bigger saurs rose slowly: grunting, grumbling, and stretching. The triceratops named Charlie always had a little trouble righting himself. He braced up against his mate, Rosie, until his hind legs were reasonably straight. The two gray stegosaurs, Agnes and Sluggo, went through a ritual that resembled a push-up — hind legs first, then forelegs up slowly with a sliding sort of motion.

Hubert and Diogenes, the two biggest theropods — each over a meter and a half tall — helped the other big guys, like Sam and Dr. David Norman. Tails really did help.

Diogenes lent a forepaw to Doc, the light brown tyrannosaur with a "tricky" left leg.

"Thank you, my friend," Doc said, his eyes barely visible under his thick lids. "Each day it seems to get a little harder."

"It does for everyone," said Tom Groverton from the doorway.

Doc nodded. "But not quite the same way for everyone. You were a little one once, who grew into an adult. We saurs were engineered. We were 'born' with our eyes open. What growth we experienced is beyond memory. The little ones stay little and the big ones were always big."

"Either way, we grow old," Tom insisted.

"Until we grow cold." Doc smiled serenely. "Or perhaps you can say we wear out instead."

"So do we."

As Hubert and Diogenes folded up the blankets and covers, Tom walked over to the wheeled, bassinet-sized hospital bed in the center of the room. Upon it was a figure who was recognizably a saurian and recognizably a theropod, but whose limbs — all of them — were missing and whose tail was a crushed-looking stump. Several long-healed scars crisscrossed his abdomen and where his eyes should have been were empty sockets.

"Good morning, Hetman," Tom said to the figure on the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Not so bad." Hetman's voice was faint and raspy, always a little more so in the morning. "I had an odd dream. Odd, but pleasant."

"What was it?" Doc asked, resting his forepaws on the bed railing.

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"Very odd. Very odd indeed." Hetman turned his head toward the voices. "Can you imagine me riding on a horse's back?"

"I can, old friend." Doc closed his eyes. "Like Zagloba, the Cossack — rebellious, reckless, full of life — riding with incomparable skill." He opened his eyes again and smiled. "It must have been a splendid dream."

Hubert and Diogenes stood at the bed railing, ready to move Hetman downstairs to breakfast.

"Like some help?" Tom offered.

"They can manage." Doc spoke for them. Hubert and Diogenes were quite literate and articulate but spoke only when necessity dictated. "Thank you all the same, but you better get downstairs before Jean-Claude and Pierrot get impatient. You remember yesterday."

The day before, Jean-Claude and Pierrot chanted "Meat! Meat! Breakfast *meat!*" until even the little ones who ate nothing but soy pellets and oatmeal shouted along.

Tom nodded. He looked at the other saurs who had still not gone down to breakfast: Agnes, Sluggo, Kara, Preston and Bronte. All of them were looking up at Tom except for Bronte. The bright green apatosaur was gazing in the direction of Hetman's bed.

Tom gave them an asymmetrical grin before leaving the room. "Well don't wait *too* long."

When he was gone, Hetman whispered, "Check the egg! I twisted in my sleep last night. I'm afraid I may have hurt it!"

Hubert turned Hetman gently on his side and lifted his pillow as Doc watched. Under the pillow was a pale yellow egg, no more than a few centimeters long.

"It's fine," said Doc.

"Don't let Doc pick it up," said Agnes. "The clumsy oaf."

"My dear Agnes, I had no intention."

Sluggo had already run over to retrieve a tiny cardboard box stuffed with cotton, hidden behind the chest near the window, where the blankets and covers were kept. He pushed it back along the floor with his snout. Diogenes picked up the egg and carefully placed it in the little box.

Agnes nudged past Sluggo and examined it, almost sniffing it, in search of the slightest possible fracture. "I guess it looks okay."

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Kara butted Agnes with her head. She was an apatosaur, but her head was big — and hard. "Let Bronte see. It's *her* egg, after all."

"Oh. Right." Agnes stepped back and let Bronte timidly press in.

As Bronte stared, a set of three tiny furrows took their place on her forehead. She worried, she pitied, she pondered, all at once as she took in the egg's contours and slightly rough surface. She held her breath and stared.

They all did, gathered around the cardboard box, except for Hetman, who listened as carefully as the others watched.

"The shell looks so frail," whispered Sluggo.

"Are you an idiot?" said Agnes. "Have you touched it? It's like granite. She won't have the strength to break through that shell."

"Or he," Doc suggested.

"What do *you* know?" Agnes grumbled.

"What do any of us know?"

Agnes grumbled again, but left it at that.

None of them knew if the time was soon for the first hairline cracks to form on the shell — for the little creature who might be within to break through the calcium walls of her prison and her protection — or his. Now. Later. Or ever.

Agnes's egg had had a yolk and a fetal sac, but no infant. So had Kara's. Bronte's first egg had contained a tiny, almost shapeless thing that never moved and never showed any signs that it could have moved, like some little plastic charm in the center of a bar of soap. The saurs had sealed that one carefully in a little plastic box and buried it in the garden.

In the past few months they had combed every database they could find with any bit of information about egg-laying creatures. They knew about ostriches and cobras, platypuses and echidnas. They even read about dinosaurs — the "real" ones, the ones who had lived millions of years before. It helped them guess at what might — or what *should* — happen, if anyone could have guessed that this *could* happen at all, which no one had.

Bronte had even practiced with bird eggs Sluggo found out in the yard, eggs that had fallen out of nests in the trees. They hatched successfully, but who knew if the egg of a saur was anything like the egg of a sparrow?

"It needs heat," said Bronte, who spoke rarely, and then only in a whisper.

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"Sit on it," said Agnes. "Gently."

"It's too frail," said Sluggo.

"Put it by the window, in the sun," said Kara.

"Too much," Agnes replied. "You might boil it. Then, what if it clouds up in the afternoon?"

"We might ask Tom," Sluggo suggested meekly. "Or Dr. Margaret."

"No!" Agnes thumped her tail on the floor. "It's not their business! It's *our* business! Besides, they won't know any better than we do. And *besides* that besides, if it gets out that we're producing eggs the humans out there will go into a panic. They'll stick us in labs again and examine us and try to work out what went wrong. Or they'll just round us up and exterminate the whole lot of us."

"They — they wouldn't do that," said Sluggo. The words didn't come out with quite the certainty he intended.

Agnes sailed on the energy of her own bleak visions. "They might even decide they like the eggs and make us sit in pens and lay them like chickens! They'll boil, scramble and fry them!"

"No!" Bronte and Sluggo gasped almost in unison.

Kara simply butted Agnes again. "Shut up!"

"Mark my words!" Agnes gave each syllable blunt, apocalyptic emphasis. "You can't trust humans! They say one thing, then do the other. They want the whole damn place for themselves. They want everything. Everything! They're greedy and sneaky and creepy and they kill things for pleasure! They screw up everything, then go around and look for more things to screw up!"

"That's true," said Preston, who for all the thousands of words he'd written, bent over a keyboard, tapping away with his four digits, rarely spoke more than a dozen words in a month. "After all, they made *us*."

"What kind of a joke is *that*?" Agnes's spiked tail swept the air in a short arc.

"Tom isn't like that," said Sluggo. "Dr. Margaret isn't like that."

"They aren't *now*." Agnes lowered her tail. "But they can turn on you just like that! It's all that *meat*. It poisons their brains and they go crazy. That's why you always have to keep your eyes on them."

"Dr. Margaret doesn't eat meat," Sluggo reminded her. "She's an herbivore."

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"A vegetarian, you mean," said Doc.

"Oh, shut up! Who asked you anyway?" Agnes sneered at Doc.

"Who asked *you*?" said Kara. "We were talking about the egg."

"What we need," said Doc, resting a forepaw on Bronte's back, "is patience. We must be careful and observant. This egg may not hatch, my dear. But if it doesn't we will learn more and know better next time."

"Someday," Kara whispered, "one will hatch."

"I hope so." Doc patted her consolingly. "But as much as I hate to say this, it may also be possible that — in our genetic idiosyncrasies — we may be only capable of performing half the job."

"Oh, who died and made *you* king?" Agnes turned away in disgust — or perhaps to hide her pained expression momentarily.

Doc smiled and gently said, "Sweet Agnes, pay no attention to me, then. I am just a lame old fool who knows nothing except that he loves all his good friends here assembled."

"You old windbag!" Agnes backed away. "As if I trusted carnosaurs any better than humans! You're all filled with baloney!"

"Nevertheless," said Hetman, his weak voice belying his proximity, "I have a feeling this one will hatch. Just a feeling, but they're about all I have left."

"Hetman," Agnes said after an embarrassed pause, "I didn't mean *you* when I said that about carnosaurs. I — I get carried away sometimes."

"*Do* you?" Kara snorted.

"If you didn't get carried away," said Hetman, "I'd fear I'd been spirited off to another house in the night. Don't apologize for being Agnes, Agnes."

She responded with a rumble — this time from her stomach. A moment later, Doc's stomach made a stuttered purr, like the starting up of an old internal combustion engine.

"Breakfast," said Kara.

Hubert and Diogenes nodded and pushed Hetman's bed toward the door, where they nearly collided with the blue blur of a breathless theropod.

"Preston! Hey! Preston!"

Axel slowed himself just long enough to shout a hurried "Hiya!" to Hetman, Hubert, and Diogenes, then he charged on, coming to a halt as he slid broadside into Agnes.

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"Uff! Will you watch it!" Agnes barked. "Isn't it enough — "

"Sorry-sorry, Agnes. Preston! Preston! Can I have — "

His attention was drawn to the cardboard box, and its contents.

"Heyyy!" Axel took a careful look inside. "There it is!"

Doc nodded. "There it is."

He looked around at the others and pointed to the box. "That's the egg!" he said, as if they might not know yet.

"Indeed," said Doc.

"Know what that means?" Axel continued.

"No," Agnes sighed impatiently. "What *does* that mean?"

"Someone's been having *SEX!*"

"Oh, shut up!" Agnes shouted. "You don't know a thing about it!"

"Yes-yes-yes-*yes!* I learned all about it from the Reggie! I saw *Animal Mating Practices and Habits, Barnyard Babies, From Sperm to Germ* — or something like that, and — and I saw *Angelique Blows Her Birthday Candles.*"

"Shut up! *Shut up!*" Agnes's back plates clicked with the tremor of her tail smacking the floor. "Are you completely — "

"Axel," said Doc, "not that I want to distract you, but you came up here to ask Preston something, didn't you?"

"Yes! Right! Yes!" Axel stepped over to Preston. "Can I have five thousand dollars?"

Agnes gasped. "*What!*"

"Five thousand dollars. That's all. And, and then they'll *build* him! They really will! They already made up the diagrams and ski-mats and stuff! Reggie showed them what I wanted!"

"And what's that?" asked Agnes. "A working brain?"

"I'll show you! Come on!" He took a few inaugural steps toward the door. "Come on!"

"'Him,'" Doc said with his best deliberation, in an effort to get Axel to slow down and explain. "You said 'him.' And 'they.' You said 'they' too. Who is 'him'? And who are 'they'?"

"Rotomotoman, Doc! It's Rotomotoman! Rotomotoman!" Axel beckoned with his forepaw. "Come on!"

Doc wasn't sure if this was supposed to be an answer to one question, or two, or to no questions at all. The more he tried to decipher what Axel had said the more his stomach rumbled.

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Agnes shut her eyes and raised her back as far as it would go. "Why? Why *us*?"

"I — I think we better go along with him," Doc said, "if we're ever going to find out what this 'Roto-man' thing is."

"Roto-*moto*-man!" Axel corrected him, then said it again more quickly, as if the mere saying of the name was a kind of sheer delight.

"He's flipped," Agnes said. "What hold he's had on sanity — "

"It hurts nothing to see what's got the little fellow so excited." Doc took a step toward the door.

"Little *fellow*," Agnes spat the words out and turned to Bronte. "Little *fellow!*"

"Come-on-come-on-come-on!" Axel shouted from the doorway.

Preston picked up the box with the egg and, hearing no objections from the others, followed Axel. Bronte kept to Preston's side, as close to the egg as possible, with Kara on the other side. Doc limped along with Sluggo while Agnes, furiously reluctant, brought up the rear.

By the time the entourage reached the stairs Axel was already at the bottom. Looking up and waving.

"Hurry up!" he shouted, as if they were missing the last total solar eclipse for the next fifty years.

"Patience," said Doc, as he and the others boarded the lift. "Patience. We're coming."

The lift was an adaptation from the "human days" of the house and was originally built to carry a wheelchair up and down the stairs. Now it was a simple flatbed platform that transported the saurs who were too small, too lame, or too tired to climb up or down between the two floors. Speed was never part of its design or of its renovation. To Axel, it was agony watching the others come down on the lift, like being forced to watch the tide go out.

When the lift came to a halt, Doc and the others had barely gotten off before Axel raced on to the dining room and up the plastic stairs to the computer.

"Come-on-come-on-come-on!"

"We can see the screen from here," Doc said, as the group settled a meter or so back from the desk. "Show us whatever it is you want us to see."

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"Reggie," Axel said to the screen, "display Rotomotoman."

The monitor screen displayed a gray background and light blue grid lines. A snatch of music played, something with a bouncy tempo and a lot of horns. A metallic gray figure appeared on the screen — a cylinder topped with a hemisphere. Just above the line where the cylinder met the hemisphere were two white circles with two smaller black circles inside them, like cartoon eyes. The cylinder rested on four small circles that one could suppose were wheels or casters, and attached at its sides were two articulated rods that one could imagine were arms. At the end of each rod was a flat, rectangular plate, out of which sprung five digits, one set off thumb-like from the others. The retinas of the presumed eyes shifted slightly from left to right, as if the figure were surveying the scene around itself.

"Go!" cried Axel.

The figure rolled off to the left of the screen, followed by horizontal "speed" lines and a cartoon dust cloud left behind. It reappeared, this time rolling in from the left and disappearing to the right side of the screen. It rolled from left to right, right to left, left to right again, as Axel chanted:

"Ro-toh Moto-*Man!* Ro-toh Moto *Man!*
Ro-toh Moto-*Man!* Ro-toh Moto *Man!*"

Before the saurs became completely dizzy watching this relentless back and forth motion, the grid lines were replaced on the screen by a simple cartoon street scene, with houses, sidewalks, trees, bushes, lawns and fences. Rotomotoman remained still now while the speed lines and changing background lent him the illusion of motion.

A chorus of voices joined the musical accompaniment.

The melody was simple enough, like a theme from an old television program from the middle of the last century, cannily synthesized by Reggie:

"*He's our man! Ro-to-moto Man* — "

Axel sang along, staring at the screen, completely enthralled.

"*He's our man! He's not from Japan* — "

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Doc looked at Preston. Kara looked at Bronte. Sluggo looked at Agnes.

"Japan?" he asked.

Agnes shook her head. She stood in front of the box with Bronte's egg where Preston had placed it on the floor, as if to shield the egg from the sight.

The "theme song" continued:

"Whaa-at a man!
It's none other than that Ro-to Moto Man!"

"But," Bronte whispered to Doc, "it's not a man at all."

"It's not even — " but Doc couldn't go on.

The verse repeated, while Rotomotoman, up on the screen, crashed through a brick wall. He raced down a busy street while a flashing red light rose out of the top of his hemisphere-head. He extended himself on thin metal legs. His cylindrical body also extended, something like a telescope, until Rotomotoman could see through second- and third-floor windows. By the end of the second verse, little flashes of flame were shooting from one of the digits of his right "hand," as if it had turned into a machine gun.

By end of the song, Rotomotoman was holding at bay a group of "bad guys" who wore traditional snap-brim caps and black masks over their eyes. Their arms were raised in surrender. Round, bulging bags with dollar signs printed on them lay on the floor where the bad guys had dropped them. A policeman with the appropriate badge, gun, and club saluted Rotomotoman before taking custody of the villains. Rotomotoman modestly returned the salute. A man in a dark suit, a monocle and top hat — presumably a bank president — shook Rotomotoman's metal hand — the same one from which bullets had been firing earlier.

The screen faded.

The saurs stood there, gaping in silence, wide-eyed, stunned and dumbfounded.

"See?" Axel trotted down the plastic steps. "Wasn't that great? Wasn't that the neatest-greatest thing you've ever seen?"

Doc, struggling for a politic response, was the first to speak. "Axel," he asked sympathetically, "have you been getting enough sleep?"

"Axel," Agnes said quietly but firmly, "are you nuts?"

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"I saw it in a *dream!*" Axel insisted. "If I dreamed it, I was sleeping!"

"I wish *I* were dreaming," said Kara.

"But these guys can make a *real* one!" Axel continued. "A real-real-real Rotomotoman! I asked Reggie and he found a company that makes — what did he call them? Prototypes!"

Bronte, in her whispering voice, said "Roto-prototypes."

"Proto-motoman," Preston mumbled.

"We should disconnect Reggie," Agnes said. "Right away."

"So — they can *build* him!" Axel turned to Preston. "And they can send him *here!* And — and it costs five thousand dollars. So can I have it, Preston, please? Please-please-please?"

Agnes made a sound that started like a cough and ended like a gag. "Five thousand dollars for a trashcan on wheels! A trashcan on wheels *that crashes through walls!* A trashcan that'll run around and *crush* us until we're flat as pancakes! A trashcan with a revolving red light flashing on his head and *bullets* shooting *out of his fingers!*"

"Yeah!" said Axel. "Isn't he neat?"

"Axel — " Doc started, but Agnes cut him off.

"Axel, look around. Do you see any walls around here that need to be *smashed* through? Do you see any saurs that need to be *flattened* out? Do you see *anyone* that needs to be *riddled with bullets*?"

"Won't do that! Won't do that!" Axel raised his forepaws. "Reggie said we shouldn't ask for that. No bullets, no smashing. He's gonna have sense — like, a sensing system so he won't squash anybody!"

"In other words," Agnes said, "a trashcan that rolls back and forth, endlessly and uselessly. For *five thousand dollars!*"

"Not a garbage can!" Axel admonished her. "Rotomotoman! He'll be mine! I made him up! Reggie helped but I made him up!" His voice took on a pleading tone. "He won't smash anything! He'll be our *friend!*"

"He won't shoot anything?" Sluggo asked.

Axel shook his head. "Rotomotoman is *good.*"

"It's good you made Rotomotoman," Bronte said. "That was very clever of you. But — "

"You did a very nice job," Kara added. "Very well done. But — "

"You are a deranged idiot and probably insane," said Agnes.

"Thank-you-thank-you-thank you." Axel bowed to each of them.

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"But perhaps," Doc ventured, "it would be better for everyone — " Axel turned to him.

Doc pointed to the computer. " — if your Rotomotoman limited his activities just to that screen." His stomach rumbled — another call to breakfast. "You can still play with him as you wish. Rotomotoman can smash through whatever he likes as long as he remains on the screen." His stomach now made an "urrrr" sound, distinct from the other noise.

Axel looked carefully at Doc.

He continued. "You can assuage the rancor of sweet Agnes here and relieve the apprehensions of the rest of us."

Axel kept staring, saying nothing.

"Axel? Are you listening?"

"Yes." Axel nodded. "Do it again."

Doc cleared his throat. "Do *what* again?"

"Make your stomach go 'urrrrrr' like that."

Doc took a deep breath. "I meant, did you listen to what I *said*?"

"Sure. What was it?"

Agnes thumped her tail against the floor. "He said that there's no way in hell that we're ever going to agree to have that metal trashcan in this house!"

Axel's jaw dropped and his eyes grew wide. One could almost feel the theropod's heart sinking. "But, but — I made him up! *I* did!"

He looked at Kara, Bronte, and Sluggo — he couldn't bear to look at Agnes. "It's not what Rotomotoman *does!* It's that he *is!* Do you see? I've *got* to make Rotomotoman!"

"*I* see that Preston would have to have lost his mind to waste five thousand dollars on a useless, dangerous piece of junk!" said Agnes.

"Axel," Doc said with great sympathy, "Preston here writes books all about great star captains, mighty armies, and flying cities, but he doesn't have to build prototypes of them or march them through the halls of our little abode." He patted Axel on the head. "We can't build everything we imagine."

Axel stepped away, head lowered, and turned to Preston.

"Is that true, Preston? Is that how you feel?"

It was always difficult to gauge Preston's feelings. He spoke so little, and what he wrote in his books presented so many points of view it was

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difficult to figure which ones might be his own. He smiled at his companions, a little more to one side of his mouth than the other.

"I think what Axel has done is creative and — amusing," he said in his soft tenor voice.

"Amusing?" Agnes replied. "I suppose a direct hit from a missile would have you in hysterics!"

Preston put his hand on Axel's head and led him to the plastic stairs, up to the computer. The other saurs, with the exception of Agnes, were speechless.

"Preston!" she cried. "What are you doing?"

Axel and Preston kept going without reply.

"Preston, you're not — you wouldn't *dare!*"

At the top of the stairs, standing before the computer, Preston said, "Reggie?"

"Reggie is ready," the computer replied.

"Please connect me to my bank."

"Preston!" Agnes wailed. "You've gone nuts too? Preston!"

"What will Tom say?" Sluggo asked Doc.

"I suppose Tom will have to deal with it. As we all will."

Preston leaned over and said right into Axel's ear, to make sure he heard, "Remember, no machine guns. No death rays. No crashing through walls. No squashing little ones. No speeding."

"Yes-yes-yes-yes-YES!" Axel wrapped his forepaws around Preston's leg. "Whatever you say! Oh, thank-you-thank-you Preston!"

The transfer of funds to the prototype company went smoothly. It had long ago ceased to be strange for non-humans to hold bank accounts. The idea that banks thought in terms of anything but accounts and their activities belongs to the generation of our foreparents. Preston's financial holdings were hardly remarkable except for their size, as were the accounts held by some other saurs — like Alphonse, who often won money on radio quiz programs — and Doc, who had a trust fund from a former "owner."

Axel's excitement set the plastic stairs wobbling as the two came down from the desk.

"Oh, thank you, Preston! Thank-you-thank-you-thank-you-thank-you! You are the best-best, most wonderful perfect greatest friend in the whole complete universe! Thank you thank you *you YOU!*"

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"Is *anyone* in here planning to have breakfast?" Tom Groverton stood behind them, arms folded and head tilted. "Now that everyone else has finished?"

"Breakfast-breakfast-breakfast!" Axel dashed out past Tom. "Come on, Preston! My best-best friend! Let's have breakfast!"

"Sorry for the delay," Doc said to Tom, "but we had a little business to take care of."

"Business?"

"I'll explain later," Doc said. "I think it will take a little time."

"Don't ask me," Agnes shook her head wearily, "I don't think I ever want to eat breakfast again."

Bronte carefully covered up the egg with a swath of cotton before Preston picked up the box and headed for the kitchen.

"What's that? Another egg?" Tom asked.

Agnes raised her tail and stared severely at Bronte.

"Y-yes," Bronte said nervously, looking from Kara to Agnes. "Sluggo found it the other day. A crow's egg, I think. It-it's rather big."

"Well," Tom said, bending down and rubbing Bronte just above the little furrows on her brow, "best of luck. You're a first-rate egg-hatcher. You'll do a fine job."

"Thank you." The words came out as a rasp, as if her mouth was very dry.

She followed Preston out of the room, just behind Kara and Sluggo, slowly heading for the kitchen. Doc walked with his head down, attempting the difficult gesture of rubbing his head with one of his short forepaws. His stomach rumbled again.

"After breakfast." He sighed. "After breakfast."

Agnes narrowed her eyes and stared up at Tom.

"You just mind your own damn business!" she said, and followed the others out of the room.

At dawn the next day, when Axel crawled out from the sleep pile and ran downstairs, he heard muffled sounds coming from the living room and noticed that the big video screen was still on.

Hubert had turned off the video just before sleep-time — Axel distinctly remembered. Maybe the video had gone on by itself — or was

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there another saur who decided to get up even earlier than Axel? He hurried over to investigate.

In the middle of the living room, about the same place where the saurs sat when they watched the video, was a lone frog — a *frog!* — about the size of a softball; pale green with a pattern of gray, blotty spots all over.

Next to the frog was the remote control pad the saurs used to change programs. He, or perhaps she, sat very still, head turned to the screen. But the frog must have heard Axel approaching. Before he could get any closer the amphibian slapped the remote pad with his left forepaw. The video clicked off and the frog hopped over to the couch by the window, then up onto the cushions.

"Hey! Where ya goin'? Hey!"

Axel ran after the frog, but not fast enough. In seconds the frog was up on the back of the couch, onto the window ledge and — flooop! — out the window and out of sight.

Axel climbed up after him — or her. He looked out into the yard, still dark in the early morning shadows, then back at the video screen.

"Wow!" He whispered. "A frog who can watch TV!"

AFTER BREAKFAST — and after most of the saurs had made their morning visit to the litter room — Doc found a spot of sunlight near the big window in the dining room and pushed the plastic box he used as a stool there. It was a good place to sit and feel a little warmth, and it still afforded him a view of the video screen, where he could see a fat man and a thin man, both in ill-fitting bowler hats, trying to move a piano up a ridiculously long flight of stairs. The piano movers monopolized his attention until the hats started to remind him of the head of Rotomotoman and he looked elsewhere for contemplation.

Little saurs were grouped in front of the Reggiesystem computer. Doc could hear them learning what the principal exports of Ghana were. On the other side of the room, the Five Wise Buddhasaurs were sitting on the couch, running their plastic horns through a synthesizer, playing something fast and wildly rhythmical that they referred to as "Chinese" or "Dizz" music. To his left, Kara was sitting with Hetman, reading to him from *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. She had the book

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propped up against the back of a straight wooden chair and she carefully turned the pages with her snout.

Other little ones were using the small, battery-powered wheeled platforms called skates to get from one end of the house to the other. On the far end of the living room, the stegosaur pair, Zack and Kip, were playing with Jean-Claude and Pierrot, the theropod tyrannosaurs, a game using checker pieces whipped across the floor with their tails, like hockey pucks. The game was called "Hit 'Em Hard" until a red stegosaur named Veronica got hit a little too hard by a stray checker. Then Agnes declared the game should be changed to "Not So Hard."

In the library, Diogenes and Hubert busied themselves shelving and re-shelving books for the saurs who perused them, whether they could read them or not — fascinated by pictures, colophons, shapes, and even the smell of the paper and binding.

Over the noise of the "Dizz" music and the tinny accompaniment of the hapless piano movers on the video, Doc could hear Agnes shouting to someone on a skate, "Hey! Slow that down! What d'you think you're doing? Racing?"

The world was in order — for the moment. Doc closed his eyes and basked in the warmth. What there was to worry over, he thought, could wait.

"Hey Doc!"

Doc opened his eyes. Axel stood before him.

"Guess what I saw this morning?"

Doc trembled. "*Not* another robot, was it?"

"Nooo!" Axel waved the notion away with his forepaw. "It was a *frog!* In here! He was watching the video!

"Yes, Axel." Doc tried to smile. "And what he was watching?"

"I didn't see, but I heard news-guy-type voices, like when they talk about stocking markets and underwater volcanoes." He looked up at Doc, who was glancing back at the video screen: the fat man was wailing and the piano was rolling down the stairs.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Axel said.

"My friend, I remember when you warned us of the giant tidal wave bearing down on us. And I remember you telling us that the Army of Northern Virginia was camped outside on the driveway. There were the

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Saracen hordes riding their horses through the woods — I remember that too. And who can forget the battle-cruisers from Alpha Centauri firing their photon rays at the power lines?"

"But that was *playing*," Axel insisted. "This was a real-real frog-guy!"

"Axel," Doc patted him on the head, "I believe that *you* saw a frog here this morning. But the rest I'd rather leave as a matter of conjecture."

Doc closed his eyes and went back to his basking, but the spot of sunlight had shifted by then. He pushed his stool over a bit to recapture it.

Axel, however, wondering over the meaning of "conjecture," moved on.

Kara and Hetman were close by. She was reading the passage from the novel where Clarence describes to Harry Morgan the trap laid by King Arthur against Sir Launcelot.

"Lancelot?" Axel forgot about the frog for an instant and asked Kara, "Where? Where's Lancelot?"

"*Laun*-celot," Kara said. "The name is Sir Launcelot. He isn't anywhere. He's a character in this book."

"Ohhh." Axel remembered Lancelot, but not *Laun*celot. Lancelot wasn't a character, he was a *saur* — a buddy — long-long-long ago. Axel tried to remember more, but the harder he tried the more he forgot.

"Hey!" he said to Kara, as Lancelot faded back from his memory, "Guess what I saw this morning?"

And he told them all about the frog who watched the video.

He told Bronte, sitting with her egg. He told Tyrone and Alfie and the other saurs gathered around the Reggiesystem computer. He told Hubert, Diogenes, Charlie, Rosie, and the Five Wise Buddhasaurs, but none of them believed him.

He even told Tom Groverton, once he finished cleaning up in the kitchen. Tom sat down on the floor and explained to Axel why he couldn't have *really* seen a frog in the living room.

"You know that the house and the grounds are covered by a security system." Tom ran his hand over the blue saur's back. "It's heat and motion sensitive. If anything enters the security zone that's not one of us, it sets off an alarm."

"Like when the cat got in and tried to eat Symphony Syd," Axel said. "Or that raccoon that scratched Agnes."

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"Exactly. A long time ago. And since then the system's been improved. So how can a frog enter the grounds without setting off the alarm?"

Axel glanced back at the window where he had seen the frog make his escape. "He must be a really *smart* frog."

Tom showed Axel the security system log on the Reggiesystem, indicating that nothing had even touched the security perimeter the night before, at least nothing bigger than a moth.

"Maybe Reggie knows that he just came here to watch the video and that he wasn't here to hurt anyone."

"I don't think Reggie works that way, Axel."

"Why not?"

Tom opened his mouth as if to speak, then erased the action with a shake of his head and tugged on one end of his droopy mustache.

"Okay. Let's say Reggie did that. Since there seems to be some question about the objective reality of this creature, Reggie figured it was okay for the frog to come in and watch the video."

"So you think the TV frog's not an objectionable reality."

That look came over Tom's face again and again he went for that end of his mustache. "Okay. Let's leave it at that. The frog is not an objectionable reality."

"Then you don't mind TV Frog coming in and watching the video?"

"TV Frog?"

"That's what I'm gonna call him."

"Well," Tom patted Axel on the head, "as long as he's not stealing anything, or hurting anyone, and as long as he shuts off the video before he goes, like you said he did, I don't mind."

A few saurs — some of the little guys, Sluggo, Hetman — believed him, or at least said they did.

And Geraldine came out of the cardboard box she called her "lab" and told Axel that she believed him too.

"He's not a real frog," she said in her soft, tinny voice. "He's from a planet on the other side of the galaxy. He's made a little tunnel through space-time to get here."

Axel took this in without question and concluded: "Wow!"

"Don't pay attention to her," Agnes cautioned him. "She's making

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fun of you. She makes fun of everyone. She thinks we're all stupid."

"You all *are* stupid," Geraldine said, then returned to her lab. Axel watched the box until the flickering lights coming from inside worried him. Tom put those fire extinguishers nearby for a reason.

"Maybe you need to sleep some more, Axel," Preston counseled him. "Maybe you're dreaming in the daytime because you don't sleep enough."

But that night, Axel stayed behind when the other saurs went upstairs to sleep. He hid behind the couch and waited until the frog hopped through the window onto the back of the couch, then to the seat of the couch, then to the floor. He hopped to the center of the room and slapped the remote pad with his left forepaw.

The screen flickered on, and the frog watched — all night long, occasionally slapping the remote pad to change the program.

He watched old films and talk shows. He looked at nature programs and documentaries about automobiles and the wars of the previous century. He watched a chorus of dancing girls sing the praises of bottled water and a man on a weather program talk for a whole hour about cloud patterns. It put Axel to sleep.

But the frog watched on. He seemed comforted by the images, as if they were relieving him of a great anxiety, or perhaps he was just grateful for the light, for that sense of life moving from moment to moment without threat or danger that the video provided.

"TV Frog" left at dawn, but came back the next night and the night after that.

Axel resolved not to disturb the frog. In the morning, as Axel ran past on his way to the Reggiesystem computer, he would call out, "Hiya, TV Frog!" and leave it at that.

But by the end of the week, as Axel ran past, TV Frog lingered long enough on the window sill so that Axel could see him, in silhouette, raising his left forepaw as if in greeting before hopping out the window to wherever TV Frogs went in the daytime.

When the crate containing Rotomotoman finally arrived, all the saurs gathered to watch as Tom Groverton opened it in the center of the living room.

The crate was enormous. Even Diogenes had to get up on his toes to

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peer inside. Axel climbed up on his shoulders, expecting to see Rotomotoman inside just as he envisioned him, fully charged and ready to go.

What Axel actually saw was about a dozen batches of components wrapped in vinyl bags and cushioned with packing foam.

Along with a copy of the invoice were several sheets of paper filled with very tiny type and headed with big bold letters:

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.

As everyone knows, "some" is a relative word. The creation of the Grand Canyon took "some" time and the formation of matter at the instant of the Big Bang required "some" assembly.

Tom carefully took the components out of the crate. As the pieces slowly collected on the floor, Agnes looked them over, frowning and sniffing.

"Hmph! Looks like they sent you the trash instead of the trashcan!"

"He's all in pieces," Bronte whispered, looking from one component to the next.

"Did he fall apart?" asked Rosie.

"They forgot to put him together," Charlie observed.

Diogenes bent over so that Axel could climb down and survey his unassembled creation. He stood with his mouth agape, looking slightly appalled and definitely overwhelmed.

"We're in luck," Agnes whispered to Doc. "With all these pieces, it'll take months for him to put it together."

"If he manages to put it together at all," Doc replied. "Not that I doubt the little fellow's enthusiasm and determination, but his attention *does* tend to wander."

"Then we'll gather up the pieces and throw them in the cellar, or put them out with the trash, where they belong!"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Doc said in his deep whisper. "I really don't want to see the little fellow despondent or disappointed."

"No, you want that big hunk of metal rolling over your toes every ten minutes!"

Axel wandered around the unassembled Rotomotoman not unlike an

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accident investigator surveying the wreckage of a train or a jet. He looked up at Tom Groverton.

"What do we do now?"

"That's up to you, Axel."

The other saurs watched silently as Axel took another turn around the components.

Tibor — the brooding, runt-size apatosaur — came up to the crate with a crayon in his mouth and quickly scrawled on it: "Tibor's Imperial Winter Palace — do NOT throw out, by order of Tibor."

Axel pointed to a dome-shaped piece of metal and said to the others, "Look! That's his head! And this other part here — " he slapped the cylinder which was the largest piece taken out of the crate, " — that's his body! Those are his wheels in that bag over there! Those rods in that other bag are his arms! And this — " he held up a large white disk which contained a dark, intricate retina in its Plexiglas frame, " — this is one of his eyes!" He held it up between his forepaws and against his chest and approached one section of the circle of saurs. The retina rolled around inside the larger disk as if the disembodied eye was scrutinizing the room.

The saurs retreated a few steps. Alfie hid his head against Tyrone's chest.

"Don't be afraid! It's Rotomotoman! Rotomotoman is *good!*"

With the retina rolling back and forth, right to left, along the bottom perimeter of the disk, the smaller saurs were unconvinced.

"You'll see, when I put him together!"

Axel sang the "Rotomotoman Song" and tried to get the other saurs to sing it with him, but as they looked over the pile of parts they appeared justifiably unenthused.

"Beware of any trashcan with its own theme song." Agnes trudged away with the hope that this was the last she would see of Rotomotoman.

THE CONTENTS of the crate were moved into the same workroom upstairs where Preston wrote his novels and Alphonse sent out his quiz and contest entries. It was also where Geraldine kept her cardboard "lab" and, at another desk, Tibor hid in his cardboard "castle."

Axel walked around the still-wrapped components laid out on the floor in a kind of random formation, a kind of "Metal Henge."

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In the center of the formation he turned around and around until he was in danger of making himself dizzy.

"Where do I start?"

Preston handed Axel the several pages of tiny type that came in the crate. "Try to read this over all the way through once — *at least once*. Then read each section and do what it tells you and don't go any farther until you finish what it tells you to do."

"Okay. How do you do that?"

Preston shut his eyes and summoned his patience with a great sigh.

"We'll read the instructions together." He sat down next to Axel, took the instructions and held them out where both of them could see. "To paraphrase Aristotle, 'First things first.'"

After reading through the instructions twice together, and after addressing Axel's occasionally pertinent interruptions, Preston arranged the components or sets of components in a circle around Rotomotoman's main cylinder.

"You'll start here." Preston pointed to a little black box that contained a quantity of intricate circuitry. "You put that into the cylinder where the instructions tell you, then you move to the next piece, and the next piece, clockwise. That way you can keep track of what goes first and what goes next. When you get all the way around the circle — and as long as there are no parts left over — Rotomotoman should be completely assembled and ready to go."

"Wow!" Axel walked around the main cylinder and looked at all the surrounding parts. "When do you think we'll be finished?"

Preston shrugged and shook his head. "The sooner you get started, the sooner you'll be done." He made sure to stress the "you" in that statement.

"Yeah!" Axel looked up at the ceiling as if he could stare straight through it.

Preston looked at Axel. For the first time in years he took notice of the long scar down his back, then followed Axel's gaze. He gently put his forepaw on Axel's head. He had been looking at the stars through that ceiling for many years himself.

"You'll do fine," he said softly. "Just fine."

* * *

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The discipline of doing one thing at a time was almost too much for Axel to comprehend, but he was undeterred. His energies — which were capable of flying off in a dozen directions at once — were for once singly directed to the task of assembling Rotomotoman.

It wasn't quite high-energy physics, or as the saying went in another century, "rocket science." The most detailed aspects of circuitry and data systems had been assembled at the company that produced the prototype. But each set of components had to be linked to another set, and those to another set. A had to plugged into B, and B had to be slipped inside C, and so on.

Axel worked until long past sleep-time that first night, and did not join the other saurs when exhaustion finally took him. He curled up next to Rotomotoman's dormant head.

"It won't be long," he said to the polished metal dome, placing his forepaw in the place between where Rotomotoman's eyes would eventually go. "I'll have you all put together in no time."

The next day, he started after breakfast and only stepped away from the work for lunch, dinner, trips to the litter facilities, and two times when he asked the Reggiesystem for explanations and advice.

Doc, with great economy, managed to explain to Axel the saurian techniques for manipulating certain tools designed for human hands, specifically the screwdriver and the adjustable wrench.

By the time the other saurs were wrapping up their daily routines and heading up to the sleep room, Axel had made it through the circle of components Preston had laid out from twelve o'clock (the first piece) to three o'clock.

It took all of the following day for Axel to get from three o'clock to five. He didn't go downstairs to eat, but Sluggo brought food up to him.

"He'd finish faster if we helped him," Sluggo told Agnes, as she peeled a strip of rind from an orange.

"So?" she asked. "That's his own damn problem. I didn't ask for that rolling trashcan to be brought here. Besides," she mashed up a piece of orange with her teeth, "the longer he works on that thing, the longer he isn't knocking around here jumping off the couch and screaming about holes in time and space or tidal waves or some damn frog sneaking in and watching the video."

"He might get sick," Sluggo insisted.

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"Well, what if he does? We've got more important things to worry about."

She motioned to where Bronte and Kara stared with worried expressions into the little cotton-filled box.

"It's been too long," Bronte whispered. "A bird's egg would have hatched by now."

"It's *not* a bird's egg," Kara said. "It's *your* egg. And we just don't know how long it might take."

"Too long." Bronte bent down and with slightest pressure touched the egg with her snout. "Too long."

BY SLEEP-TIME, Axel had made it to seven o'clock on the circle of parts. The components were joined together, but they had to be placed inside the main cylinder. Together, they weighed much more than Axel could possibly lift, or even drag. And by this time Axel's head was filled with numbers and letters: Bs and Ds and Cs and Qs floated around like tadpoles in a pond; he looked at the joined components, but all he could see was a wall of binary numbers.

Still, he made the effort, grabbing on to one end with his forepaws and pulling mightily.

It wouldn't budge.

He went around to the other side and pushed. The assemblage remained immobile. He kept pushing.

He pushed until Sluggo came by.

"You need to sleep," he said.

"First," Axel said breathlessly, "I have to get this *stuff*," he took several deep breaths and patted the block of components, "into *that* thing — " His voice trailed off as he took more deep breaths and weakly pointed at the cylinder.

They both pushed, but all they could manage to do was polish the floor under their feet.

"Get some rest," Sluggo said when they finally gave up. "We'll think of something in the morning."

"Think," Axel mumbled deliriously. "Think think think! I have to *think!*"

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"Sleep first," Sluggo said, and nudged him toward the door.

Axel went along like a prisoner being led back to his cell.

The sleep-pile looked a little like a circus under a collapsed tent. The saurs were already all gathered under the blankets, except for Hetman in his little bed, just next to the pile.

Sluggo lifted the blanket up at one end to look for Agnes and Axel crawled in with him. It was impossible to make his way in without stepping on someone and eliciting responses like, "Hey! Watch it!" "Ooof!" and "Your foot's on my crest!" He climbed around from one end of the pile to the other, paying little attention to the ruckus he caused, but he couldn't find a place that seemed comfortable.

"Think think think!"

He lifted up the blanket, crawled out and headed straight to Hetman's bed, climbing over the railing and getting in next to him.

"Hetman! Hetman!"

"Yes, Axel," Hetman whispered in his raspy voice.

"Okay if I sleep here?"

"You're very welcome to sleep here, Axel."

"I didn't mean to wake you, if I did. Did I wake you?"

"No," said Hetman, who was often haunted by pains old and new, though he refused any strong drugs to help him sleep. "It hasn't been a good night."

"Is the egg under your pillow?"

"Yes it is. Poor fellow," he said, referring to the egg. "I hope he is sleeping better inside his little shell — or she. But perhaps it can't be called sleep if you haven't yet awakened."

"Sluggo said I should sleep, but I have to think too. There's all this *inner* stuff I have to get into Rotomotoman, but it's all put together and too heavy to move." Axel rolled a little closer to Hetman. "Did I tell you yet about Rotomotoman?"

"At least twenty times, Axel, but tell me again. I enjoy hearing you tell me about the wondrous Rotomotoman. Whisper it, though, this time. We needn't wake the others. And maybe it would be best if you left out the Rotomotoman song."

Axel did just as Hetman requested, starting all the way back, from the dream to the "inner stuff," careful to leave out the theme song, though he really-really *did* want to sing it.

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As Hetman hoped, Axel fell asleep as he listed the catalog of parts: Motor Assembly A to Relay Systems Response Assembly B, Relay Systems Response Assembly B to Motor Systems Response Assembly C — and so on. Axel's voice trailed off after he mentioned that Thermostat Assembly F attached to Carrier Drawer F1.

Hetman listened. The house was silent except for the occasional grunts and snores from the sleep-pile. He might manage a little sleep too before dawn, if he could just get a little question out of his mind —

What does a Rotomotoman need with a thermostat?

Axel slept harder than he had at any time before: he slept past dawn. For once he was not at the window to glimpse the last light of the stars (if it were a clear night) and the first light of the sun (if the day was similarly clear).

Instead, he was lost in a dream of Rotomotoman roaming about the house. The strangest thing about the dream to Axel was that Rotomotoman, with his round head, looked very much like a big soft-boiled egg sitting in a cup. It occurred to Axel that in some ways Rotomotoman was *his* egg — but instead of needing the pieces to come apart, he needed to put them together.

Together!

He sat up, awake. Put them together! He looked around and the room was already filled with sunlight. Hetman lay beside him, asleep at last, but the sleep-pile was gone — everyone was gone, the blankets put away.

He climbed out of Hetman's bed and ran to the workroom just in time to see Diogenes and Hubert lowering the assembled components into the uprighted cylinder.

Not only that, but the wheels were attached to the bottom, the arms attached to the sides: listless, but attached.

Nearby, Doc rested on his little box, screwdriver still held between his forepaws.

A crowd of saurs, mostly little ones, was gathered around them, watching and chattering. The Five Wise Buddhasaurs sat up on the top of a set of plastic stairs, to get the next best view to the ones Geraldine and Tibor had from their respective desktops.

Agnes had the assembly instructions spread out in front of her.

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"Okay, next to the motor assembly junk is that other junk."

"The battery pack?" Doc asked.

"That's what I said, you dimwit! You're going to need the gray cable and the two blue cables that are in that little bag."

Tyrone and Alfie opened the bag and brought the cables to Agnes.

"Hey!" Axel said. Everyone stopped and turned to him.

"Don't look at *me!*" said Agnes. "It wasn't *my* idea! I can't help it if everyone in this house has gone completely insane."

"Sluggo mentioned to us this morning the trouble you were having," Doc said, putting the screwdriver down. "We thought a little help might get the project moving along."

"But, but — " Axel moved closer. He couldn't keep his eyes off the cylinder. It was still headless, but it had wheels and arms, and it looked nothing like a soft-boiled egg anymore.

He glanced at the circle of parts: nine o'clock. Three quarters of the parts were gone.

"Guys — I can't — I don't know — "

"Oh, shut up!" said Agnes. "Go down and get your breakfast. Tom's waiting for you. Then get back up here and help us out."

To Diogenes and Hubert, she said, "Now that that thing is loaded and Axel is up, get Hetman downstairs and come straight back. I want the lid put on this trashcan today! Tomorrow at the latest!"

Agnes left nothing else to say. Axel ran downstairs. Diogenes and Hubert left the room looking back over their shoulders. Agnes noticed Doc staring at her with his most serene smile.

"What the hell are you looking at?" she said.

"I am looking at a marvel, my dear — at a kind of brief miracle. I am looking at Agnes in a good mood."

"You'll be looking at a spiked tail meeting your face if you don't move your butt off that box and get to work!"

With that encouragement, Doc picked up the screwdriver and returned to the cylinder without further comment, but unable to remove the grin from his face.

About this time, in the world out past the yard and beyond the trees, a buzz was starting.

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As best anyone could tell, the buzz began in the offices of the radio telescope at Mount Herrmann. Apparently, a message had been sent to certain coordinates from someone who went by the name of "Axel" and was addressed to "space guys." There was nothing particularly extraordinary in that, as the telescope operators had been accepting messages for many years as part of a promotional and public relations program to aid in the funding of their research, which included a search for extraterrestrial intelligence.

What started the buzz had to do with the content of the message, of a certain reference to "making eggs." And since the address of the sender was one of the houses operated by the Atherton Foundation for surviving saurs, it presented a rather astounding possibility.

The rumor could have been a prank, a mistake, a misunderstanding. But there were a number of important persons in the bioengineering community who were not sleeping well and would not sleep very well until the mystery was cleared up. And the bioengineering community was an important group of persons who held a great deal of sway in many circles. They did not bear sleeplessness well.

And so a call was made to Ms. Susan Leahy, the grandniece of Hilary Atherton herself, who was then in charge of the foundation.

"They want answers," she said to Tom Groverton over the phone. "Or I should say they want assurance, if you know what I mean."

"They want to send someone over to inspect the house," Tom replied.

"Our charter allows us to legally restrain them, but I'm afraid that would only stir up more controversy. The Office of Bioengineering Standards has never approved of our autonomy and would like nothing better than to challenge it."

"So they're coming," Tom said.

"I'll be with them. And I want Dr. Pagliotti there too," she said, referring to Dr. Margaret. "I won't have them pushing their way around, but I'm afraid they have to search everywhere to their satisfaction to see that the saurs aren't producing their own eggs. If they find anything that makes them think otherwise, they'll file to do further research, and that will get us into a battle I'd much rather avoid."

"I understand," said Tom.

"I know you do. You'll tell the saurs. Let them know we're coming."

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"Yes. It'll be good seeing *you* again, at least."

"I only wish it was under less stressful circumstances. You do a wonderful job, Tom. And the saurs never fail to surprise me."

"Then you won't be disappointed this time, Susan. I can assure you."

By sleep-time the workroom was empty of everyone but Axel — and Rotomotoman.

The faint traces of moonlight coming through the window endowed everything in the room with a kind of ashen, metallic hue. The circle of components was gone. In their place stood Rotomotoman, just under a meter and a half tall, set upon four sturdy wheels and his narrow, rod-like arms down at his sides. His large, round eyes, set against the curvature of his head, were fixed in an expression perhaps best described as dementedly earnest — a fitting reflection of his creator. When seen in connection with the first horizontal seam of the cylinder, a dozen centimeters below them — a seam that suggested a mouth — those eyes also betrayed a certain perplexity, as if Rotomotoman might be thinking to himself an incomplete expression of surprise in the vein of "What the — !"

A cable connected him to a wall outlet, charging his battery. That was all he needed — with the exception of downloading some delicate software into his brain — before he could come to life.

Axel stood transfixed, staring up at him with undiluted awe.

"It's real," he whispered. "Real-real-real."

"You should get some sleep," said Doc. He'd come into the workroom at Sluggo's request, when Axel could not be found in the sleep-pile. "It won't do to have you falling asleep tomorrow, at the moment of your triumph."

"Look at him!" Axel pointed up at Rotomotoman. "Isn't he the greatest thing you've ever seen? The most stupendous, marvelous, fantastic, *greatest* thing you've ever seen?"

"I've seen quite a lot of him, my friend, in these past few days." Doc's forepaws were still sore from handling all the human tools. His foot still hurt a little from when it got wedged under the cylinder while he was attaching the last of the wheels — but it was the foot of his weak leg anyway; the addition to his limp was barely noticeable. "But yes." He put his forepaw on Axel's shoulder. "It is — impressive."

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"I couldn't have done it without all you guys helping me. I have the best-greatest friends in the whole universe!"

"It's your creation, don't forget. Without you, your Rotomotoman would not exist, would it?"

"I don't know," Axel said, seriously pondering the question. "It's like now I feel like — like he always *was*, you know? And all I did was, like — "

"Like what?"

"Like, *recognize* him! Like, there's all this real stuff in one place and all this could-be-real stuff in another place, like behind a window. Did you ever see one of those gumball machines that's got stuff other than gumballs in it? Like shrunken heads and rubber spiders and stuff? That's what it's like — like Rotomotoman was in one of those gumball machines and I turned the handle and got him out!"

"Now I *know* you need some sleep, my friend. You're talking like a Platonist. Or even worse: a Jungian."

"What's that?"

Doc patted his head. "It's a kind of person who needs a great deal of sleep. Come along. When Axel sounds profound it's a strong hint that one is either dreaming or should be dreaming."

Doc led Axel out of the workroom with a series of tugs. Only after they turned the corner and entered the hallway would Axel stop looking back at Rotomotoman.

But then Axel stopped in his tracks, struck with an idea.

"Hey!" He gestured to Doc and headed for the staircase. "Now I can show you!"

"It's far too late, little fellow, to show me anything — "

"No-no-no-no! Come on!" Axel trotted a few steps ahead, then looked back at Doc. "But quiet!" He held one digit of his forepaw up. "Ssshh!"

Axel crept down one stair, and then another, and then another. Even at this slow pace, Doc found it hard to follow. His bad leg made it hard for him to take stairs, up or down, at any pace. He held to the round, vertical balusters of the handrail and inched himself along until it occurred to him that he still hadn't been given a good reason for putting himself through this exertion.

"Axel, would you mind — "

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"Ssshh! Just a little farther." His whisper was louder than Doc's appeal. "One more step!"

Doc had to put his weight on his bad leg to descend the next step. He winced, but caught himself before he cried out.

"There! See?" Axel whispered. "Can you see?"

Doc could see nothing. He reached for the next baluster, putting himself in an awkward angle, almost hanging over Axel. He raised his tail to counterbalance his weight. If he slipped a mere centimeter he would topple headfirst down the rest of the stairs. But at last he could make out what Axel was pointing to: a light coming from the living room.

The light changed color and intensity with quick little flickers and flashes, as if the video screen was still on.

Not "as if" — it *was* on!

"See?" Axel whispered, more successful this time in keeping his voice down. "It's TV Frog! I told you he was really there! He's really-really-really there!"

"Axel," Doc felt his grip slipping on the baluster. "It's much more likely that someone forgot — " He couldn't finish the sentence, since it was *he* who turned off the video that night.

"Maybe," Doc muttered, "a technical thing. A 'glitch,' as they say. A malfunction in — "

A voice with the range and volume of a train horn sounded above them:

"Hey! What the hell's going on down there!"

In the fraction of a second between Doc hearing Agnes's voice and his forepaws slipping from the baluster, Doc could distinctly see the light go off in the living room, as if someone had slapped the "off" square on the remote pad.

After that, he saw nothing, but distinctly felt himself in gravity's clutches as first he tumbled over Axel, then tumbled again and tumbled again.

He shut his eyes for what seemed like a moment, but when he opened them the lights were on. He was looking up at Axel and several other saurs, including Kara and Sluggo — Tom Groverton was there too — all standing over him with worried expressions. Tom ran his hands over Doc's back and abdomen, checking for broken bones, no doubt.

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"I'm all right," Doc said several times, and after Tom examined him carefully he even believed it. Bruises, muscle pains, but nothing worse. Agnes, still at the top of the stairs, kept berating him for "skulking around in the dark like a goddamn idiot!" — which was akin to having a bad ringing in the ears — Doc had lived with that before.

"Ohhh, Doc! I'm sorry-sorry-*sorry!*" Axel repeated it until it became a litany. "I didn't mean — I wanted you to see — that it *was* TV Frog! It really was! I'm soooo sorry-sorry-sorry!"

"I followed along of my own choosing, Axel." Doc tried to reach for Axel's forepaw but, falling short, weakly waved to him. "It must have been funny to watch. A good pratfall, had there been an audience."

As Tom helped him back up the stairs and into the sleep room, Doc couldn't help thinking about the light in the living room. Not that he could believe in TV Frog any more than he had before, but there was something — *something* — very strange about that video screen being on when no one could have turned it on. And as he leaned his head back against the little cushion Kara brought for him, it was that thought, more than any bumps or bruises, that kept him up for the better part of the night.

ROTOMOTOMAN WAS ready — almost.

The saurs gathered in the workroom. Most of them were on the floor, surrounding — at what they believed was a safe distance — the figure of Rotomotoman that towered over them. Others were perched on Preston's desk and others yet were on the desk set across from it.

None had ventured up to where Geraldine and Tibor kept their separate abodes, but they too were quite literally out of their boxes to view the great moment. Tibor even wore his "hat," which was really a green piece of concave plastic with a little rim. It looked ridiculous on his head but Tibor insisted it was quite regal and dashing, especially when he wore it at a jaunty tilt.

Rotomotoman was attached by cable to the hard drive of Preston's computer. No one knew how long the download would take, but when it was finished Rotomotoman would come to life. Axel, standing next to his creation, tried to count down the seconds, but he lost his place several times and had to start over.

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"Attention!" Agnes called out from her place near the door. "Attention! Keep *back!* When this piece of junk goes berserk there's no telling *who* will be crushed under its wheels! All saurs must *keep back!*"

Only Sluggo paid attention to her, and that was only to get her to stop shouting.

Tom Groverton was there too. No one noticed, though, that he was standing next to the two fire extinguishers he'd placed next to Geraldine's lab.

Axel gave up on the countdown and started to chant: "Go! Go! Go! Rotomotoman! Go! Go! Go! Rotomotoman!"

Some of the other saurs picked it up. "Go! Go! Go! Rotomotoman!"

Others joined in. "Go! Go! Go! Rotomotoman!"

Even the saurs who didn't speak squeaked and chirped to the rhythm of the cheer.

"Go! Go! Go! Rotomotoman! Go! Go! Go! Rotomotoman!"

"Attention all saurs! Keep *back! When* the piece of junk goes berserk — "

"Go! Go! Go! Rotomotoman! Go! Go! Go! Rotomotoman!"

" — will be indiscriminately *crushed* under — "

Rotomotoman jerked very slightly, hardly a movement at all. The download was finished. A faint hum and whir emanated from his mechanical innards. His hemisphere head turned slightly to the left and the pupils of his huge eyes followed the same general direction, then started back slowly to the right, taking in the whole scene.

The chanting stopped. Even Agnes held off her shouted warnings.

It is hard to imagine a more startled expression on a piece of machinery, if one can imagine an expression on a piece of machinery at all. The eyes had much to do with it, looking like enormous versions of the eyes that adorned toys and dolls in years long past — but much more active, animated, in fact. Those eyes and the mouth-like seam in his cylinder-torso created an expression: surprise, panic, astonishment.

He surveyed the ninety-odd dinosaur-looking creatures staring up at him — and one human, with arms folded, leaning back against a desk, smiling with apparent admiration.

Rotomotoman raised his arms in a gesture of surrender and recoiled right into Preston's desk.

The liquid-gray display screen on his torso — his only means of

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communication — filled with exclamation points, question marks, and other strange symbols that may even have been incomprehensible to other rotomotomen, if any existed.

"See?" Agnes shouted. "Just as I told you! The monster is ready to pounce! Back away!"

But Rotomotoman just froze in that posture until Axel approached him on the back of the large brown triceratops named Dr. David Norman. Dr. Norman lowered his head and Axel dismounted. He walked straight up to his creation with his left forepaw upraised.

"Hiya! I'm Axel!"

Rotomotoman stared down at the small blue creature. He lowered one of his arms and bent the joint that approximated the elbow of the other. His display screen cleared of symbols, except for five characters of simple, recognizable alphabet and punctuation:

"Hiya!"

Many of the saurs cheered. Tom Groverton put his hands together and applauded.

Agnes nudged Preston and muttered, "You sure there aren't any machine guns in those fingers?"

"Positive."

"No flame throwers or lasers?"

"You saw the instructions yourself. Rotomotoman is weapon-free. He *does* have a rotating red flashing light that comes out of the top of his head, but as you can see he hasn't had cause to use it yet."

Agnes grumbled. "He *still* looks like a trashcan made up for Halloween!"

"Hey! Guys!" Axel said, as if the other saurs might not know yet, "I want you to meet your new friend! This is Rotomotoman!"

Rotomotoman held his metal hand horizontally just above his eyes: a salute to the assembly, with "Hiya!" still on his display screen. More cheers greeted him.

"Come on!" Axel coaxed his metal friend away from the desk. "A little this way! Follow me!"

Words appeared on his display screen: first "Axel," then "follow."

Rotomotoman complied with each direction, if a little tentatively. His software may have overly cautioned him about running over little

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ones, but he cast his gaze downward and thoroughly surveyed the floor, checking to make sure no one was underfoot. If a meter-and-a-half tall cylinder rolling on four wheels could be described as moving "daintily," it would describe Rotomotoman just then.

Axel led him to the door of the workroom. Rotomotoman — making no sound but an efficient, high-pitched whir — saluted the door. The word "door" appeared on his display screen. He followed Axel down the hallway, holding his salute all the way to the lift platform, where he stopped cold.

Rotomotoman didn't seem confident that he could keep his balance on the flatbed lift, with its guardrails set no more than a few centimeters high. Axel coaxed him on with the assurance that the lift moved so slowly he would be in no danger — *and* with the assistance of Diogenes and Hubert pushing from behind. With "Help!" replacing "Hiya!" on his display screen, Rotomotoman held so tightly to the staircase wall he left a trail of grooves in it, but everyone was too excited to notice them.

As he rolled from the platform to the floor he cast his gaze upward as if in thanks to some heavenly Rotomotogod.

"Look over here, Rotomotoman!" Axel said, pointing to the living room. "That's where the video is."

Rotomotoman saluted the video screen. His own screen alternated the words, "Video" and "Hiya!"

"Over in that room is where we eat!"

Rotomotoman saluted the dining room. "Dining room — Hiya! — Dining room — "

He saluted everything that Axel showed him, including the computer, the plastic stairs, the bookcases, and the Five Wise Buddhasaurs' plastic saxophones. And all their names were printed out on his display screen, each punctuated with the same greeting.

"I suppose this question should have come up long ago," Doc asked the ecstatic Axel, while Rotomotoman saluted the lamp table, the couch, and a broom Tom had left leaning by the living room window, "but just what exactly is Rotomotoman supposed to *do*?"

"Rotomotoman is here to protect good guys from the bad guys!"

"Well," Doc sighed deeply and patted Axel's head, "may your labors be few."

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The notion of "bad guys" was not entirely forgotten by Doc as Tom Groverton gathered all the saurs around in the library later that afternoon. In the back of the room — standing at attention, of course — was Rotomotoman, his creator proudly at his side.

"They'll be here tomorrow, and they'll be looking for eggs," Tom said, his hands folded loosely as he sat on a little stool in the center of the room.

"Tell them to mind their own damn business!" Agnes shouted back.

"That would be fine," Tom said, "if we could. But these folks have rescinded their so-called 'proprietary rights,' based on a certain definition of what you guys are. And as you know they've been looking for loopholes ever since they agreed to the Atherton Foundation's proposal. Your intelligence, your emotional capacity, your longevity — it's baffled them for years. They have the support of a certain portion of the scientific community who'd like very much to make you the subject of study. And they want desperately to find out what they did, well, 'right,' so to speak, when they designed you. Generating eggs might change the deal if they find out. I mean — " Tom cleared his throat, "if they find any."

"Any *what*?" Doc asked in a whisper.

Tom smiled. "That's the spirit. I won't ask any questions and you won't tell me any lies — other than the ones you may already tell me."

"Why, *Tom!*" Doc said, his heavy eyelids raised as far as they would go. "What makes you think we'd tell you any lies?"

Tom ignored the remark. "Remember, I'll be here. Dr. Margaret will be here, and even Ms. Leahy will be here to make sure these folks don't do anything out of line. But they *will* be thorough, and we can't really stop them, because we want to show them that we have nothing to hide."

"We *have* nothing to hide," Doc said.

"Exactly." Tom stood up. "Now, I have some things to do upstairs before I start dinner. But there's one more thing: it might be a good idea to keep Rotomotoman in the background when they come. We don't want to hit them with more than they can take."

"What did he mean by that?" Axel asked as Tom left the room.

"He means that our visitors tomorrow are unprepared for your genius," said Doc.

"Genius!" Agnes marched up to Axel. "Spelled the same as 'idiot!'

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This is all *your* fault! Sending messages to 'space guys!' You're the one who should be locked up! Not Bronte!"

"*Bronte!*" Axel gasped. "Who wants to lock up Bronte?"

"No one said anything about locking up Bronte!" Kara looked over at Bronte, whose concern about her egg had done little to steady her nerves for the meeting. Now she was trembling.

"What do you *think* they'll do?" Agnes continued. "They'll take her off to a laboratory and stick her with needles and cut her up to find out how she did it!"

A cry of alarm rose from the surrounding saurs. Memories of past injuries and dangers became acutely tangible even to the smallest and simplest of them.

"Don't listen to her," Kara said to Bronte. "Agnes is overreacting as usual. No one's going to take you away." She turned angrily to Agnes. "Can't you *ever* keep your mouth shut? We're all in a panic when we need our heads about us!"

"They'll take the egg away, won't they?" Bronte stammered. "Like the scientists in the video we saw once, climbing into nests and stealing the eggs of rare birds."

"No one's going to do that here." Preston put his hand on Bronte's back. He could feel her shivers. "We'll think of something."

"I'm sorry, Bronte," Axel said. His face never before looked so long and mournful. "I didn't know this would happen."

"It's not your fault," said Bronte, her nubby teeth grinding at her lower lip. "You were just — just being Axel."

"That's the whole damn problem right there!" Agnes said.

"Maybe Rotomotoman can help us now," Axel said in a low voice.

Rotomotoman, in the back of the room, saluted at the mention of his name.

"Listen," Agnes barked at Axel, "I don't want to hear *one more word* about Rotomotoman! Space guys! Electric trashcans! Frogs watching the video! If I hear *anything* more from you — "

Agnes was interrupted by a voice that had so far not entered the discussion. It came back from the little bed over by the window, and in a low, raspy voice.

"Axel is right," said Hetman.

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"*What*?" Agnes was ready for verbal battle, and the words "Axel is right" set her back plates upright, but they were spoken by the one saur she would not assail. "*What* did you say?"

"I said, Axel is right. Something Axel told me a few nights ago has kept me up thinking and — I could be wrong, but — Axel, do you still have the assembly directions for your Rotomotoman?"

"They're with Preston's stuff, up by the computer," he said.

"Bring them down here, and hurry! We have *stuff* to do!"

"Stuff to do!" Axel ran upstairs without hesitation.

"The rest of you," Hetman continued, "I want you to look very carefully at the sections on that sheet which refer to the Thermostat Assembly F and Carrier Drawer Assembly F1. Perhaps I'm completely wrong, but I think we've been overlooking something remarkable about that creation of Axel's."

WHEN THE BIG CAR arrived the next morning, Axel was at the window, up on the little lamp table, scouting.

"Huuuu-mans!" He announced to the others. "They're here! And they're in a *bad guys* car!"

The long dark limousine had an official seal from The Office of Bioengineering Standards on the side door. It stopped right in front of the house and out came three strangers, Dr. Margaret, and Ms. Leahy. Of the strangers, there was a young African-American, impeccably dressed in a topcoat and dark suit; a gray-haired Caucasian, much more casually dressed, in an unbuttoned leather jacket and a dark T-shirt; a young Asian-looking woman with very short canary-colored hair, wearing a plaid workshirt and a denim jacket.

Ms. Leahy led the way. Tom met the little group out on the porch.

"I'm really sorry about this," she said as she shook Tom's hand. Susan Leahy was trim and efficient as always, and she was starting to let the gray come into her hair. She was one of those eccentrics who still wore glasses, though hers were rimless. "You've told them what this is all about, didn't you?"

"Yes, they know."

She nodded and turned to the three persons who were to search the house.

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"Okay, folks, you know the rules. You can search everything, everywhere, but if anything you do seems to be upsetting or traumatizing the saurs, I or Dr. Pagliotti here will have to ask you to back off. This is Tom Groverton." She put her hand on his shoulder. "Any questions you may have I'm sure he'll be glad to answer. We want to cooperate fully, but you have to understand that we have to act in the best interest of the saurs."

The young African-American, Dr. Phillips, nodded politely to Ms. Leahy. "We've done this kind of work at other houses. I can assure you we'll be as non-disruptive as we possibly can."

Dr. Margaret, who had seen some of the saurs' eggs herself, came up to Tom and gripped his hand. She wore a white jacket that looked a little like a short lab coat, and for once her long brown hair wasn't tied back. She didn't say a word but searched his expression for any sign of what she might expect.

Tom could only shrug. Anything can happen, he seemed to say, but don't get worried yet.

"You know," Ms. Leahy said, "it's nice to have an excuse to come here and visit some old friends."

Axel was still standing at the window, waving to her.

She waved back. "Hiya!"

When the group entered the house, some of the saurs stopped to watch them, cautiously and curiously. The smaller saurs went on with their business, moving from room to room on skates, getting their computer lessons, a brief game of Not So Hard, or watching the video.

"*Attention humans!*" Agnes announced from atop a lamp table near the door. "Attention all humans! It's time to SHAPE UP!"

"Don't mind Agnes," Ms. Leahy told the officials. "She greets most humans that way."

"Humans!" Agnes continued, "It's time to SHAPE UP! You've been running things stupidly for too long! It's time to STOP BEING STUPID!"

"So here's the little guy who's caused all the ruckus." Ms. Leahy went straight to Axel.

"Miss Lay-hee! Miss Lay-hee! Howya doing? What are you doing with the bad guys?"

Ms. Leahy carefully picked him up and perched him on her shoulder. "Important stuff, Axel. Want to see?"

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"Yeah!"

She made sure she had a safe grip on him and that he wouldn't slip, even with all his excited gesticulations. "So what's all this about you sending messages to space?"

"Yeah!" said Axel. "Reggie and me! We sent a message to the space guys and told them all about us!"

The three investigators gathered around to listen to the conversation. The young woman, Dr. Yoon, took out a pocket computer to record it.

"And have you heard anything back from the 'space guys' yet?"

"Yeah! Maybe! At least I think that's why TV Frog is here! He comes at night and watches the video, but no one's seen him but me! Doc almost saw him but he fell down the stairs! He's okay, though. Doc, I mean, but TV Frog's okay too. Anyway, I think TV Frog just wants us to think he's here because he can't sleep. But Geraldine said he was really sent by the space guys, because they know to drill holes in time and space!"

Ms. Leahy looked at the three investigators.

"Well, here's your source for the egg story."

Dr. Yoon slipped the computer back into her pocket.

"And who's that over there?" Ms. Leahy pointed to the metal cylinder with the hemisphere head, standing out of the way, just to the left of the video screen.

"That's Rotomotoman! I built him myself! Well, Reggie helped me, and Preston, and Doc, and Agnes, and a lot of the other guys. But I thought him up all by myself!"

Rotomotoman was motionless. His display screen was empty. His left arm was listless at his side but his right arm was raised in a salute. It was hard to say what he might have been saluting — his right eye looked off to his left and his left eye looked off to his right.

The investigators looked over Rotomotoman carefully. They even took his head off and inspected the components. Some of the saurs got very quiet and even Agnes briefly desisted from her shouted exhortations.

"What is it supposed to do?" the man in the leather jacket, Mr. Chase, asked Tom.

"Ask the inventor." He pointed to Axel. "You can talk to them, you know."

"He fights bad guys and protects the good guys!" Axel offered without waiting to be asked.

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"Doesn't look like he can fight any bad guys in his shape," Dr. Yoon said as she re-secured Rotomotoman's head.

"I — I forgot to plug him in last night!" Axel looked over at Doc, sitting on his little box, nodding almost imperceptibly. Then he looked to Agnes, who waved her tail threateningly.

"I've got to charge him up! He'll be okay tomorrow!"

"The kitchen is this way," Tom said to Dr. Phillips, "but I'm afraid the only eggs you'll find are in the refrigerator."

The investigators looked anyway — very carefully. They looked into every cabinet and along the baseboards and around the ceilings. They went through the cellar and the litter room, the living room, the dining room and the library. They looked behind all the books on the shelves. Dr. Margaret wouldn't let them look under Hetman's pillow, but she took the pillow out herself and let them inspect it.

"If the lady and gentlemen wish to look under the mattress," Hetman said, "they are welcome to do so."

"If I may?" Dr. Phillips said in an apologetic voice and did his work as quickly as possible. Before he moved on, he said "Thank you," to Hetman, came back and added, "Thank you — sir."

"You're very welcome."

They searched all the rooms upstairs and even went up into the attic, where the saurs had their "museum," made up of all the things friends and former "owners" had left them over the years: toys, paintings on construction paper, knickknacks and little articles of clothing. The investigators found several egg-shaped things, made of glass and plastic, but not one real egg.

Mr. Chase's attention was drawn to a little charm on one of the shelves, a gold-plated Star of David on a slender chain. He picked it up to examine more closely.

"Put it back!" Agnes, who had followed them up into the Museum, shouted at him.

"Is this yours?" Mr. Chase asked her. "It's very pretty."

"None of your damn business! Put it back!"

Agnes harangued the investigators all the way down from the attic.

"Foo! Humans! War mongers! Animal eaters! Planet spoilers! G'wan! Beat it! Scram!"

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"Adamant, isn't she?" Mr. Chase said to Dr. Margaret.

"You're upsetting her," Dr. Margaret replied.

"Sounds to me like she's upsetting herself."

"Didya hear?" Axel, still perched on Ms. Leahy's shoulder, whispered to her. "He called Agnes *an ant!*"

Ms. Leahy held her finger up to her lips. "Ssshh. Maybe he meant '*aunt.*'"

When the investigators reached the sleep room they were approached by a pale green hadrosaur who, after some deliberation, shouted to them, "Yar-woo?"

"No! No!" Agnes coached the hadrosaur. "That's not what I told you to say!"

The hadrosaur tried again: "Yar-woo!"

"No! 'Foo!' You're supposed to say 'Foo!'" She smacked her tail against the floor.

"Foo?"

"Forget it! Just *forget it!*"

"Foo!" The hadrosaur smiled and walked away.

In the closet of the sleep room, Mr. Chase found a little cardboard box with wadded-up cotton inside. Nestled in the cotton was a tiny egg.

"Here's something," he said to his colleagues, who were searching in other parts of the room.

"Hey! Put that back!" Agnes shouted. "That's not yours!"

Mr. Chase held up the egg and inspected it carefully. It had a blue tint to it, and was no bigger than the first joint of his thumb.

"It's a bird's egg," Bronte walked up to Mr. Chase nervously. "A robin's, probably. Sluggo found it in the yard. Sometimes we try to hatch them — as if they were ours."

She looked up at Dr. Yoon and Dr. Phillips. "If they do hatch, we feed the little bird until it's old enough. Tom can sometimes find another nest in the yard and put it back. Sometimes the older birds accept him." Her voice was trembling now. "It's — it's just sort of a thing we do."

Dr. Phillips took the egg and held it up to the light from the window. "Looks like a robin's egg to me."

"That's what she said!" Agnes stood next to Bronte. "Now beat it! G'wan! Scram!"

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"Is this when they pull their guns out?" Axel whispered to Ms. Leahy.

"They don't have guns," she answered.

"I thought they were bad guys!"

"Well, not really. Not *that* kind, at least."

Dr. Yoon, with arms folded, glanced at Agnes and said to her colleagues, "It may be that their eggs and the robin's eggs are almost alike. We better take it in."

"No!" Bronte gasped.

Ms. Leahy bent down and put her hand gently on Bronte's back. "Must you?" She asked the investigators.

"We have to know," Dr. Phillips put the egg back into its box. "I can give you all sorts of reasons, but the answer simply boils down to this: we have to know."

"Hear that?" Agnes shouted to the other saurs. "He said 'boil!' I *told* you they were going to eat them!"

"Please," Kara said to the investigators. "It really *is* a robin's egg. Honest. Don't take it away."

Dr. Phillips bent down and spoke to Bronte, resting the box carefully on his knee. "We won't hurt it. We just need to know what it is. It's a very simple procedure and we can have it back to you in a day or so."

"What if it hatches?" Bronte asked. "You'll take care of the little bird? You won't just — pitch it?"

"If that's what happens, I'll take care of it." He reached out and touched the little furrows on her brow. "I promise."

Dr. Phillips put the cardboard box into a little specimen bag, but left the bag open. Dr. Yoon made some notes with her pocket computer. Saurs filled the room. None of them spoke, not even Agnes, but they all looked at the investigators, who did their work quickly and tried not to look back.

"They may not be bad guys," Ms. Leahy whispered to Axel, "but I'll bet you that right now they don't feel like good guys."

She, along with Tom and Dr. Margaret, followed the investigators back out to the limousine, but in the living room she noticed Doc, still sitting on his plastic box, staring out toward the window as if deep in thought.

She put Axel down and kissed him on the snout. "I'll see you later," she said. "Gotta talk to my old buddy over there."

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Ms. Leahy knelt down next to Doc and hugged him. "My old friend. Forgive me for not stopping to talk to you."

"You were busy, I know. There is nothing to forgive."

"I'll come back soon. For a *real* visit. We'll sit on the porch and talk of Cicero and Democritus and St. Augustine."

"Juvenal." Doc smiled. "'*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*?'" He looked out toward the front door, where the limousine waited. "Not bad for a tiny, manufactured brain, eh?"

"It's not how much brain you've got, but how you use it."

She hugged him again and Doc reciprocated as best he could with his short forearms.

She whispered: "Is there any *real* reason to worry?"

Doc shook his head. "We'll be fine, for now."

When she stood up, Ms. Leahy could see the motionless metal cylinder of Rotomotoman saluting her. She returned his salute, bid farewell to the others and walked out to the limousine.

On the porch, Dr. Margaret asked Tom, "What will you do now?"

"I think I'll sit out here for a while."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "That's not what I meant."

"It's not really my call. It's theirs." He gestured back to the house with his thumb.

"What are they doing in there?"

The horn sounded from the limousine.

Tom walked Dr. Margaret to the limousine. "Come back tonight."

He took her hand and squeezed it gently. She got into the limousine and he watched it until it was out of sight, past the trees. For a few more minutes he sat on the bench on the porch, then got up and looked through the living room window.

Rotomotoman, back in motion again, had rolled out to the center of the room. The saurs were gathered around him in a circle. Tom could hear a faint mechanical buzzing and a high-pitched beep come from the metal cylinder. At the same moment, a section of the odd little robot, defined by nearly imperceptible seams in his cylindrical torso, slid out like the drawer of a desk.

Tom couldn't see what was inside, but he knew what it was. Bronte was the closest to the drawer, peering in with sad, hopeful eyes.

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Then she opened her mouth as if to gasp.

She spoke to the others and they all moved in even closer, trying to get a peek inside. Tom couldn't hear a word of it, but he didn't have to.

Axel, perched on Hubert's back to stare into the little drawer, shouted out, "It moved! I saw it move!"

Tom went back to the bench. His coming in now would just create more nervous commotion and probably start Agnes shouting again.

There would be plenty of time later to consider all the implications. The investigators, back-tracking through their information, might request a look at the schematics of Axel's metal friend and discover Rotomotoman's very practical function as an incubator.

But then, Reggie might have anticipated that too, and devised a little camouflage for it. Never underestimate the Reggiesystem, Tom learned long ago.

After all, Reggie too was a kind of human-made life form, and like the saurs had developed in his own way.

For now, though, the moment belonged to the saurs, especially Bronte, the mother-to-be.

THAT NIGHT, AXEL descended the stairs as stealthily as he could manage, in search of TV Frog. But the living room was dark, the video turned off. For a moment he thought that TV Frog must not have come, but he turned around and saw the illuminated screen of the Reggiesystem computer in the dining room, and before it sat TV Frog, visible in silhouette. The plastic stairs were placed in front of the desk, just behind where TV Frog sat with an old-fashioned clicker mouse, which he slapped with his left paw just as he'd slapped the video's remote pad.

TV Frog seemed to be clicking through a set of files, text on the right side and pictures on the left. Axel couldn't make out any of it, so he crept up the steps to get a closer look.

The pictures weren't very pleasant to look at: emaciated creatures with agonized expressions, bruised, battered, and scarred. Gaping mouths, hollowed eyes, muscles tensed with pain —

They were saurs, all of them.

These were the official files of the Atherton Foundation, all of their

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cases, with photos taken of the saurs when they were first found or brought to them.

Axel recognized some of them — Zack, Kip, Charlie, Hetman — Oh! Hetman! How did he ever make it? He barely looked alive. He —

The words got all tied up in Axel's head. If he looked at the pictures, at least he didn't have to think about them. But how could he *not* think about them after looking at all the faces, all the pain —

And then he saw a photograph of a small, blue theropod, exhausted, lying on his side, head twisted back as if he could hardly raise it — one black, expressionless eye was visible, staring upward. A second photo showed a long, straight cut down his back, infected and swollen.

The cut was the same length as the scar down Axel's back.

Axel felt as if the desk dropped out from under him — and the floor, the house, everything — as if he was falling through time and space.

"Space and Time and Time and Space — "

Whirling and spinning like an amusement park ride, but only the really, truly scary parts, and no one was there with whom he could share the elation and danger.

A boy, the one he'd been purchased for, had cut him open, goaded on a bet, to see if he had mechanical parts or biological organs. "Not like he's an animal," the boy had said. "Just a thing. Don't matter what anyone does to him."

But the boy said "him," like he *was* someone —

And Lancelot was there! Lancelot, his buddy! The two of them were purchased together, and they lived with the boy and his family. "Buddies forever, Lancelot and Axel, Axel and Lancelot — "

But Lancelot was all cut open, spread out on the floor, screaming, pleading, "Please! Stop! Help me! Kill me! Stop!"

And Axel had shouted too. "Don't! Don't hurt him! Stop it!"

A grown-up interrupted the impromptu dissections. Axel had run, with all his strength. He'd run, hidden himself, bled. With no food, with all his energy and muscle spent, he slipped into a hole on the edge of a construction site and waited to die, like Lancelot.

Axel remembered what that upward-turned eye in the photograph was looking at.

It had been night. The stars were out, and they were everywhere.

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"Space — " said Axel. He put his forepaw on TV Frog's smooth back. It shuddered like an unbalanced engine.

"It was all space and big and perfect and endless. And even though I was small, I felt as big as space. I felt as big as the universe."

TV Frog clicked the mouse and the monitor screen went dark.

"That's what I should have asked the space guys about," Axel told him. "What I wanted to ask before I forgot. I wanted to ask if they knew any way to bring Lancelot back, or do something, so that he wouldn't be dead."

TV Frog just sat there. Still shuddering. His eyes looked immeasurably deep and sad.

"I guess they couldn't, huh?"

Whether or not he could answer, TV Frog didn't, which seemed like a kind of answer in itself.

Axel and TV Frog stood in front of the computer, and after a while the monitor clicked on again.

The screen filled with stars.

This time, when the screensaver reached the end of the cycle, with the smeared thumbprint galaxy just in view, it seemed to go a little farther. The galaxy filled the whole screen.

"You know, Reggie says the universe is one big place!"

TV Frog's eyes bobbed down into his head in a kind of affirmative gesture.

"I came down to ask if you wanted to come upstairs and see what's happening. It's the biggest thing that's ever happened here. The biggest thing that's ever happened *anywhere!*"

TV Frog didn't move.

Axel bent down and tugged at TV Frog's forepaw. "It's okay! No one will see you there! They're all looking at the egg!"

Axel kept tugging and urging until TV Frog turned away from the computer.

"We'd better hurry! It's almost ready to hatch!"

But TV Frog propelled himself slowly, one cautious "flop" at a time.

"Come on! No one will see you! I promise!"

All the way down from the desk, across the floor and up the stairs to the second floor, with Axel leading, TV Frog moved on: flop, pause, flop, pause, flop.

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They peered around the doorway into the sleep room. All the saurs were gathered around Rotomotoman, situated in the center of the room. He, like everyone else, was staring into his incubator drawer, his pupils cast at an awkwardly downward angle. Bronte stood closest to the drawer, along with Kara, Agnes, Doc, and Preston. The only sounds in the room were the soft purr of Rotomotoman's machinery and the anticipatory breathing of every creature in the room.

Sitting in the back, as far out of the way as they could situate themselves, were Tom Groverton and Dr. Margaret. They were holding hands, which Axel thought especially fascinating. He tapped TV Frog and pointed to them.

"Look at *that!*" he whispered. "I'll bet they're learning how to make eggs too!"

He kept staring at the humans until he heard a kind of chiming sound coming from Rotomotoman. A disk-shaped part at the top of his head slid away and up from the cavity rose a flashing, rotating red light — just as Axel had designed it.

A word flashed on Rotomotoman's display screen: "Ready!"

The little drawer opened.

The quiet sighs of awe and pent-up relief from everyone gathered around sounded a little like a low, deep chord from some great church organ.

"Come on! Let's get a closer look!" Axel reached over to tap TV Frog again, but there was no one at his side now.

TV Frog was gone.

"Hey!"

Axel wanted to go look for him, but his curiosity about the egg proved the greater draw. Axel crept up to the incubator drawer and told himself he'd find TV Frog later.

He gently pushed through the thick crowd of saurs. Charlie grouched at him until Rosie reminded him that it was Axel who was responsible for Rotomotoman. They let him through, and Axel climbed up on Hubert's back, where he could easily see into the drawer.

The first few hairline cracks had already appeared on the surface of the shivering egg. A piece of the shell dropped away and from that breach popped a little pink head at the end of long neck.

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No one looked more surprised than Rotomotoman, whose huge disk-eyes implausibly seemed to grow larger at the sight.

The tiny hatchling's eyes were shut at first, but its mouth was open and it made a little sound, a "Gack!" like a clearing of its throat.

Diogenes, who in all his years at the house had never been heard to utter more than a few words, turned to Hetman's bed and whispered, "Did you hear?"

Hetman nodded. "Thank you, that I lived long enough to hear it."

Then he (or she) opened his (or her) eyes.

The small, black, glistening orbs seemed instantly focused. The hatchling looked over the top of the drawer and seemed to see everyone and everything.

Bronte bent down and caressed the little creature with her snout, then tapped away another piece of the shell to free it more.

"It's hard to say," Doc looked at the hatchling, "since he's without precedent, as far as we know, but he looks like a healthy little fellow to me."

"Little *fellow*?" Agnes snapped. "Can't you see it's obviously female? Obviously intelligent? Obviously smarter than any carnosaur could ever *hope* to be?"

"Don't start," said Kara. "It's not the time to fight."

"What will happen now?" Bronte asked Kara. "Will she grow? Will she change and mature? Will she learn to do all the things we do?"

"Who knows?" said Kara. "We'll learn as we go along."

"It won't stay a secret for long," said Charlie, rubbing his nasal horn against the floor. "Those humans in the big car know more than they're saying. They wouldn't have taken Axel's story so seriously if they didn't."

"That they figure it out isn't what matters," Agnes said. "It's what they'll do when they know."

"Which we can't predict," said Preston, smiling at the little pink creature in the incubator drawer. "And this isn't the time to try."

All this time Axel, balanced on Hubert's back, kept trying to get the hatchling's attention, waving excitedly with one forepaw while holding to Hubert's neck with the other.

"Hiya! Hey! Up here! Hey! Hiya!"

The tiny pink sauropod looked up at Axel.

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"Gack!"

"Hiya, Gack! I'm Axel!"

"That's not her name!" Agnes waved her tail. "Moron!"

Kara nudged her and shook her head. "We'll sort it out later."

When Axel climbed down, Preston put his forepaw on his head and said, "We need to thank you. You — and Reggie."

Axel looked up at Preston. "Don't forget Rotomotoman!"

"Yes, Rotomotoman too."

Rotomotoman stared down and saluted the hatchling, the red light on his head still rotating, as the word "Gack" flashed on his display screen.

Axel looked around the sleep room and noticed that Sluggo was up on the box seat under the window, looking out.

"Hey!" Axel hopped up and joined him. It was his favorite spot, after all. "Whatya doing up here?"

"I — I just wanted to look up at the stars. I don't know why. The egg — and everything — I feel scared and I don't know why. Or I do — but I'm still scared. I just needed to look up at the sky and see the stars."

"Me too." Axel put his forepaws up against the glass. "The Moon and the planets and the stars and the galaxies are all spinning through space! And *we're* spinning through space too! It's a fact!"

"When I look up at the stars," Sluggo said, "I feel — I don't know — I feel — "

"As big as the universe!" Axel said.

"Yes. That's it. As big as the universe."

"It's a good night for looking." Axel gazed at the Moon, his mouth wide open. "It's the biggest, best universe in the whole world!"

Agnes might have disputed him, and if not there were many others who would, but it wasn't in Sluggo to argue. He had only one universe to judge from, just as he had only one egg to judge from, but the both of them in their different ways seemed pretty remarkable.

And so, in an old house at the edge of the woods, far from the nearest megalopolis, Axel and Sluggo looked out from the window of the sleep room, up at the stars.

"Look at that!" Axel pointed to a luminous streak, razor thin, cutting a diagonal line across the night sky.

"A shooting star!" Axel nudged Sluggo. "Do you see it?"

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"Yes," Sluggo answered.

The shooting star was there for a few seconds, then disappeared.

"Wasn't that neat?" Axel said.

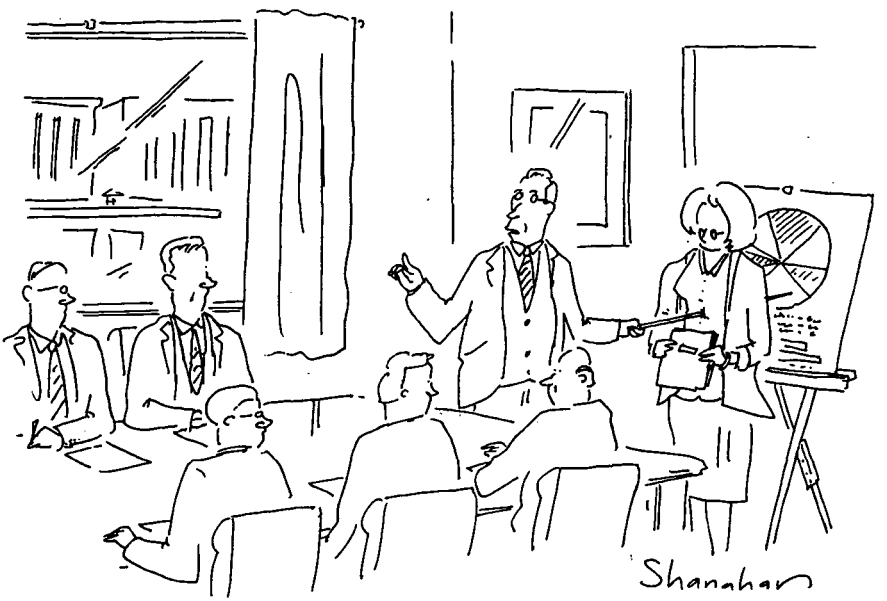
"Yes, but — " Sluggo looked over at Axel, then out the window again.

"What?"

"Aren't shooting stars supposed to shoot *down*? That one was going *up!*"

"Heyyyy!" Axel rubbed the spot just under his chin. "That's *right!*"

The two of them kept looking out at the sky — the waiting universe before them and the new world behind, as good as any and better than most — but that was the only upward-shooting star they saw that night.



"All those in favor of screaming!"

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

The Unkindest Cuts

INTRODUCTION

These manuscript fragments were recently found among the papers of _____.[1] Unfortunately, the papers had been stored in the
[famous dead sf writer]
author's wine cellar, and when the supports on a rack of _____
[expensive vintage]
gave way, the subsequent flood of wine ruined almost the entire trove of stories, essays, letters and _____. Only the
[embarrassing type of fetishistic pornography]
laborious efforts of _____ have succeeded in recovering even
[famous sf critic]
these small portions of one random text. The gaps in the manuscript have been assigned grammatical and contextual labels based on the scholar's best understanding of the author's published work. The editor hopes that the readers will be able to enjoy these gap-ridden story fragments by allowing their imaginations to fill in the blanks.

THE _____
[cosmological noun]
THAT _____
[past tense verb]
EARTH
by

_____
[famous dead sf writer]

[1]This introduction itself has suffered from numerous obscuring editorial coffee stains that necessitate interpolations upon the part of the reader.

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Tony _____ occupied the junior spot on the staff at
[unusual-sounding last name]
_____ Observatory. Fresh out of his
[classic science fiction writer indicative of author's influences]
stressful post-grad stint with the _____ Professor
[derogatory adjective for female behavior]
Angela Wiltdonger, Tony faced in his new job the subtle discrimination leveled by the senior scientists against the unproven newcomer. Tony consoled himself with the thought that over time his professional status would _____. Unless, of course, everyone secretly hated him
[verb]
because he was a _____.
[ethnic stereotype]

In any case, Tony's low rank secured him the absolutely worst viewing times on the big, expensive _____: the five minutes
[super-science gadget]
just before dawn. Only during these scant hours could he collect data for his researches. Tony's controversial theory about the origin of _____ in the _____ during the _____
[quantum particle] [distant nebula] [past era]
and their effect on _____ had brought him nothing but
[type of human behavior]
_____. Nonetheless, Tony clung _____ to his pet
[obscene noun] [adverb]
theory.

Little did he suspect that today would prove the turning point in his _____.
[nerdy neurotic compulsion to succeed]

As he pressed his _____ to the _____,
[body part] [very cold portion of super-science gadget]
Tony quivered with _____. He could barely believe his
[emotion]
_____ senses! There, clear as day, stood revealed a Big
[adjective involving F-word]
Dumb Object composed entirely of _____!
[quantum particle, plural]

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"Mr. _____! Exactly what do you think you're doing?"
[unusual-sounding last name]

Striking him like an unexpected blow, the hated voice of Professor Angela Wiltdonger caused Tony to slip from the observing platform and land clumsily at Wiltdonger's feet, which were shod in the very latest style from _____.
[classy designer]

Tony picked himself up and brushed _____ off his pants.
[yucky science glop]

"Um, just finishing my observations, Professor Wiltdonger. And you won't believe what I just discovered — "

"I don't give a _____ about any of your trivial observations.
[part of rodent's anatomy]
It's one minute past dawn, and you're supposed to be swabbing out the _____.
[radiation-producing lab equipment]
Get busy!"

Tony bit his _____. No point getting in an argument with
[body part]
Wiltdonger now. Once he had his discovery firmly documented, it would be a short step to winning _____
[one of the few prestigious prizes whose reputation is not marred by SFWA-style infighting]
and scientific immortality. Then he'd see what kind of _____
[a dish best served cold]
he would enjoy!

* * *

...the ruins of the _____
[classic science fiction writer indicative of author's influences]
Observatory. Barely two walls of the structure remained standing beneath the night skies, in the wake of the attack by the _____,
[mythologically suggestive name, plural]
who had poured forth from the Big Dumb Object once it assumed Earth orbit. Who could have believed that just one eventful week separated Tony's dawn-hour discovery from the current _____? And to
[catastrophic event]
think that Earth's last hope against the invaders resided now in a desperate

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collaboration between Tony and Professor Angela Wiltdonger!

Brushing back a lock of her _____ hair, Wiltdonger swore,
[color]
then refocused her attention on the delicate task before her. Manipulating her _____ with trembling fingers whose chipped painted
[improvised tool]
nails revealed the merciless alien eradication of beauty parlors everywhere, the _____ professor sought to join _____
[sympathy-provoking adjective] [computer part]
with _____. Tony steadied his hand holding the
[unlikely cross-discipline gadget]
_____ and uttered encouraging noises. Finally,
[primitive improvised source of illumination]
after what seemed like hours, Wiltdonger sat back on her sexy _____ and said, "It's done. This inspiration of yours had better
[body part]
prove golden, kid. Otherwise humanity is destined to serve for all eternity as _____ for our new interstellar overlords."
[slang term among convicts denoting prisoner's "girlfriend"]

"I — I think it'll work — Angela...."

This unprecedented use of her given name caused Professor Wiltdonger to look at Tony in a new way. Her _____ blue eyes filled with
[adjective]
_____, which was returned in triplicate by her companion.
[emotion]
Suddenly they were no longer two rival scientists, but simply a man and a woman alone beneath the stars.

Without any planning on Tony's part, he found that he and Angela were _____. With the shattered bits of the _____
[gerund] [super-science gadget]
digging into his _____, Tony began to murmur sweet words
[body part]
into Angela's _____. In the midst of her passionate recipro-
[body part]
cation, she murmured back, "_____."
[Sultry exclamation]

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* * *

With the final coruscating flares of the _____
[name of heretofore unknown type of ray]
dying down around them, Tony and Angela stood upon a mound of rubble in the ruins of _____, clutching each other's _____
[major metropolitan area] [body part]
and gazing skyward. Fleeing like a pack of _____, the few
[cowardly beast, plural]
surviving celestial invaders made a beeline toward their Big Dumb Object.

"We did it, Angela! We did it!"

"_____."

[Wry observation indicating basic cynicism tempered by newfound empathy]

Tony turned to hug his new mate. "Well, it's up to us now to restore civilization."

"Considering that ninety percent of humanity has been wiped out, there's an awful lot of _____ to do."
[gerund]

Tony blushed. "I'm up to it, Angela. If you are."

Angela smiled _____. "We'd better get busy then. Because if I
[smarmy adverb]
know anything about the way the universe works, there's one thing we can be certain of. The _____ will be back!"
[mythologically suggestive name, plural]

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After a long stretch of primarily writing movie novelizations, Bob Thurston returned to the form of short fiction recently with favorable results such as "Slipshod, at the Edge of the Universe" (Feb. 2001) and "The World's Light Heavyweight Champion in Nineteen Twenty-Something" (June 2001). His new story is a think-piece that grew out of a class discussion on Gilgamesh in the humanities course he teaches at New Jersey City University.

Who Wants to Live Forever?

By Robert Thurston

I WANT TO LIVE FOREVER.

Yeah, well?

You have the power.

Yeah, well?

Make me immortal, damn it.

Remember Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh?

He's a character in a Mesopotamian epic who wanted to live forever, and he settled for becoming young again, and he lost both.

So what's your point?

Remember Shangri-La, where living long is won at a cost — you can stay young only within its borders, shriveling into old age as soon as you pass back into the world. Or remember *Gulliver's Travels*, where Gulliver meets those Struldbuggs, who are immortal but nevertheless ravaged by age. They are just skin hanging off bones and their memory is disappearing — they're immortal, yes, but vegetables forever.

Okay, so I don't want to be stuck in one place, and I don't want to live forever but grow old anyway. I just want to live forever, no aging, perfect

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health, all the perks, none of the drawbacks. No tricks, just live forever.

I promise no tricks. Still, there are limits to what a person can do, even with centuries to work with. You are, to be frank, no genius and even geniuses would be bored after centuries of immortality. Your first few centuries might be exciting, but eventually you'll have been there, done that. Been there, done everything. What do you do then? Sulk for a few centuries?

I'd rather sulk than die. Put it on a bumper sticker, if you like.

After sulking, what then? What if you get suicidal?

What do you mean?

You can't get suicidal. You can't commit suicide. No matter what depths of despair you reach, you will have to go on. A kind of super-existentialism. Makes me shudder all over. Whatever happens, you're stuck. You'll be there. If civilization dies out, you'll be there. If the world blows up and crumbles beneath your feet, you'll be there.

You're assuming that humankind will not travel the universe. If Earth is gone, I can be, oh, on some other planet in some other star system with a colony of Earth people that has evolved into a utopian society and solved the woes of the universe.

And you? What will be your role in this perfect place?

What do you mean?

If these people have evolved and you, no genius remember, are there among them, how will they regard you?

I don't get you.

Remember your limitations. If you reach your limit, your potential, you may become pretty smart by our standards today. But for your utopian society in your perfect place in a still-intact solar system, with humans who have developed according to the accumulated needs of centuries, you'll be pretty stupid, by their standards. Your place in their perfect society will be as their equivalent to the village idiot.

You don't know that.

Oh, but I do.

I'll take the chance. I'll be the idiot, but I'm the one living forever. I'll find ways to accommodate. You have the power. You do have the power, right?

Well, yeah.

Then give me the pill, inject me, wave your wand and transform me,

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put me on your Frankenstein table and run bolts of lightning through me. Whatever. Make me immortal.

Well....

Wait! I want to rephrase. Make me immortal, in perfect health, without aging or all the drawbacks. Immortal with no drawbacks. Make me immortal as I am now. You can do that, right?

Well, yeah.

Why don't you then? Now.

I have to be sure. I never do anything without being sure.

Just what do you want?

I always want everything to be for the best. I don't want to perform any act that would hurt any individual. I hate all the times I've done something like that and felt bad afterward.

I'll risk it. No guilt for you.

I didn't mean guilt. Just feeling bad.

Who cares what you feel? Just do your job. Why're you hesitating?

How about I just give you your youth back, any age you want?

No way, no. I'm not that old. You're just talking a few extra years. If I was ninety it might be a good deal but —

You won't make ninety.

You're sure of that?

Well, yeah. So, a jump back to your youth might be the ticket. Then you can live right and make sure you reach ninety. Way things are going, all this DNA-genome stuff, life spans'll be longer and you might get a century, century and a half, maybe more than two hundred years. Not a bad deal.

But living forever's better. I want to live forever. Understand? I want to live forever.

Well, okay.

So do it.

I just did it.

But — but how can I tell?

You'll probably be sure after a century or two or three. You'll be able to tell, after others are dying off and you're still standing.

But you could be a fraud, right?

Well, yeah.

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You could tell me I'll live forever and I won't know you're a liar until I die.

Well —

How do I know I can trust you?

You came to me. That suggests you believe I can do it. I did it. So grin and bear it. By the way, your teeth are forever, too. Don't have them pulled out. Don't even have a crown put in. Crowns won't be forever. They'll just wear out and there might not be dentists in the future and you'll have a mouth full of jagged pointed teeth. Makes for inconvenient chewing, you know.

I should be indestructible. Not only my teeth but all of me.

Indestructible's a different order. I don't even do indestructible.

You said you wouldn't trick me.

No trick. Just a fact. An observation really. Chances are nobody'll remove anything from you.

Remove? Even though I'm immortal, things can be removed?

Well, yeah.

How?

Some swordsman of the future wants to slice off your arm, then whack he slices off your arm.

What happens to the arm? ... Why don't you answer?

Sorry. It was just not the question I expected.

What do you mean, expected?

Most people, self-involved as they are, would reply what happens to me, armless, not what happens to the arm.

Well, what does happen to the arm?

It's immortal, like the rest of you. It merely exists forever, wherever it's put. If it does get sliced off, you should be sure to collect it, see about reattaching possibilities.... You've been silent there for a long time.

Oh. I was just picturing myself armless and legless. Like in that novel about World War I, where the soldier lives on without limbs in a hospital. But with me it's armless and legless forever?

Seems so.

My immortality...my immortality is...my immortality. Well, I guess I'll have to be very careful, right?

Well, yeah.

What does it mean, really?

What do you mean, what does it mean?

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I mean, how do I handle this immortality stuff?

I suppose you will just live your life cautiously, very cautiously, avoiding risk. Just like you've been living it so far.

I can do that. I'll watch a lot of videotapes and DVDs.

Until electricity goes.

I'll write an eternal memoir.

Until paper disintegrates.

I'll have sex with an infinite number of lovers.

Until other methods of fertilization replace sex and sex organs become vestigial.

You're kidding.

Well, yeah. In a way.

I'm tired of talking to you. I'm leaving.

Be sure not to be buried in an avalanche or in lava.

Okay. Stop.

Be sure not to be trapped in a cave or stranded on an asteroid.

I'm going.

Be sure not to catch fire. Be especially sure of that.

Good-bye.

'Bye. ... Thought you'd left.

I'll go. Soon. Not just yet.

Well, I have an errand. If you're here when I return, we'll talk. You've got plenty of time for talking.

Yes. But not much to say.

Saying that is the first step.

To what?

Who knows? You don't know and that's the important thing to know.

I don't get it.

You have to, now that you're immortal. Here. This is the clicker for the TV. I don't have cable or satellite. You'll have to make do.

Get out of my face, will ya?

I'll go.

So go.

I'm going. Going.

Hey, I thought you said no tricks.

Gone. ☙

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"If a synchronous swimmer drowns," quipped comedian George Carlin, "is the other one supposed to drown also?" In his latest story, Harvey Jacobs doesn't quite take this question seriously...but Mr. Jacobs doesn't appear to take many things seriously. His short stories (of which this one is the fourteenth we've published since 1967) tend to be witty, ironic, and often very very funny. Take the plunge with this one and see if you don't need to come up for air between chuckles.

The Synchronous Swimmer

By Harvey Jacobs

BASIL WILLING FIRST BECAME aware of Synchronous Swimming during an Olympic telecast. He watched a couple from Upper Volta, perfectly coordinated, perform an incredible series of twists, turns, soundings and breechings, he watched their extended legs and thighs wave like flags in the same wind, he saw arms and hands, even fingers, move in exquisite harmony, he saw their bodies lift like whales from the water's gravity, their heads pop up at the identical moment and gasped when the pupils in four eyes rolled this way, then that way while the skulls that held them snapped in opposite directions with the intensity of tango dancers. He was utterly captivated.

No fool, Basil had a good idea of the reason he was so moved. His own life was in total disarray. He lost his job as a programmer for a dotcom startup when the venture capitalists suddenly withdrew their funding. His live-in lover, who he jokingly called his insignificant other, announced that she was leaving him in favor of a high-school boyfriend she'd run into by accident during a trip to Saks Fifth Avenue where she'd gone

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to buy Basil new underwear and socks before their annual sale ended. He thanked heaven they had no marriage contract or children to fight over but she took their dog, a large, shaggy beast, and his lawyer advised him against seeking custody because of costs and complications.

In addition to his personal troubles, the world around him was heaving and pulsating like an overfilled bladder about to burst and scatter bits and pieces of history across the galaxy. There were vicious germs circulating through the mail, the urgent threat of invisible terrorists who had already wounded what had seemed to be the invincible body of his city, hourly news reports of unspeakable horrors from countries with names as remote as the lands in forgotten dreams. Inside this swirl of chaos the self-contained calm of the synchronous swimmers made an astonishingly welcome statement, a testimonial to order, civilization, the virtue of discipline, sensual beauty as redemption, the possibility of survival, even triumph for the whole human race.

Basil immediately appreciated what those swimmers had endured to get where they were: hours of practice, the physical pain of contortion beyond anything the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes ever imagined, visions of a gold medal shining like a distant sun drawing them toward its blazing core, their willingness to hone and refine their stunning presentation even as their chlorinated skins shriveled and flaked. All in the outside hope of standing on a raised center platform while their flag rose and their country's anthem played hugely through state-of-the-art speakers.

Basil had finally found his sport. Games like golf, tennis, baseball, football, soccer, squash, and the like had never really captured his interest. He envied friends and associates who gave themselves to the individual pursuit of athletic excellence. He felt left out during passionate discussions of perfected serves or artful putts, experiencing the guilt of the uncommitted. Now, late in life, he was past forty, Basil discovered Synchronous Swimming in an epiphany worthy of any prophet.

Suddenly, dimensionally, he understood the frenzy of fans, that private flame fueled by desire that flickers even in the belly of rank amateurs. If, even for a moment, an ordinary human could fuse with the immortals and taste fame's leftovers, everything would be forever changed. He determined to swim synchronously at least to the best of his ability, to search out the elusive essence of synchronicity.

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Basil wasted no time. Enough precious days had already been squandered. He bought a top-of-the-line bathing costume identical to those worn by the Olympic contenders. He joined a local health club with an excellent outdoor pool. He bought books, magazines, and pamphlets that surveyed every aspect of Synchronous Swimming. He found relevant videos and watched them over and over, absorbing subtleties of the sport. When he wasn't involved in sending out resumés or going on job interviews he was at the club lifting weights, running on the treadmill, leaping into the generous pool to test his wind and loosen muscles gone rigid from years of under-use. As he strengthened, he tested moves he'd read about or saw on his tapes.

He tried to do his swimming when the pool was deserted but sometimes, even at odd hours, others would come to do their pedestrian laps and he sensed them watching him with nervous eyes. Basil realized that serious Synchronous Swimming evoked not only suspicion but even hints of hostility from those outside the fold. He felt not unlike a Hasid who walks around the city in black hat and long silky coat or a Sikh flaunting a turban in the driver's seat of a taxi. That feeling, a mix of alienation and arrogance, actually increased his resolve.

It came clear that the hours he spent in the gym and the pool were not enough. Synchronous Swimming demanded much more than just horizontal indulgence. Training was a totality, it required both horizontal and vertical obeisance. Curiously, the one thing it didn't require was constant submersion. True, water was an important part of the picture, but not the whole story. To get good, really good, Basil accepted that every waking moment, dripping wet or bone dry, must be regarded as an opportunity to improve.

He began swimming synchronously around the clock. When he woke in the morning he got out of bed and walked to the bathroom with a series of intricate flourishes. When he sat on the toilet, reached for the roll of paper, got up, washed his hands, brushed his teeth, wiped his face, combed his hair, dressed himself he practiced ever more complex choreography. When he went to the local luncheonette for coffee and eggs, while he browsed the newspaper, rode the subway on his way to an employment agency, or sat face-to-face with a potential boss he bent his body, swiveled his neck, spread and snapped his fingers, stretched his legs, curled his

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ankles, clenched his toes, extended his arms, exercised his eyes until his pupils could move like marbles left, right, up, down, together, apart.

To keep himself company, Basil created an invisible partner, an anonymous female with no formulated features. She was more a creature of essence than specific attributes, something like a shadow. In the future he would, of necessity, seek out a flesh-and-blood teammate. At that point he would dispose of his ghostly companion. That, along with his respect for sanity, was reason enough not to get too involved with his temporary friend, but he did allow himself to work with her, talk with her, sometimes play with her, always respectful of their mutual privacy, always mindful of their wispy relationship. They chatted in the pool and on the street, confining themselves to subjects directly related to Synchronous Swimming. They watched other swimmers perform on Basil's VCR, dissecting movements of elbows, hips, nostrils, earlobes, breasts, crotches that made the difference between competence and glory. They agreed to disagree and were openly critical of one another's abilities, committed to honest appraisal, focused on crossing new horizons. Basil encouraged his nameless partner to nurture ridiculous thoughts of "going for the gold." Her enthusiasm got him off his ass and back into the green, grueling pool when he felt too exhausted to move.

Whenever opportunity arose, Basil went out on job interviews. After a long and difficult confrontation with the Human Resources Manager of an established developer of digital games, a meeting Basil thought very promising, he got a call from the headhunter who'd provided the lead. "Listen, Mr. Willing, about that possible placement, they were very pleased with your qualifications but I'm sorry to tell you the bottom line was a no. They said you struck them as a hugely talented but afflicted man."

"Afflicted?"

"Their word. They said you were prone to a series of severe spasms. They said you carried on some kind of dialogue with yourself about hydrodynamics and bubbles. That's what they said."

"Could you call them back?" Basil said, laughing. "There's a simple explanation. The thing is, I'm deeply involved with Synchronous Swimming and I have this demanding invisible partner. What I was doing was debunking the feasibility of a certain torso inversion she'd proposed for

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our routine. If I was into, say, golf, they'd have probably been impressed. We would have ended up comparing war stories and arguing over handicaps. Synchronous Swimming is a developed taste. Those so-called spasms and the snide comments to my partner had nothing to do with the job. Explain that to them. "

"Maybe something else will come along soon," the headhunter said.

Basil thought hard about the rejection. He censured himself for allowing what was, at best, a hobby to become an obsession. On future interviews he would have to find a way to be more discreet about his exercises and to table any discussions with his partner. He knew that changing his behavior wouldn't be easy to manage. It would be as agonizing as it was to quit smoking cigarettes. But discrimination against the truly synchronized was a sad fact of corporate life. There was no lobby ready to defend his civil liberties. What if he failed to hide his chronic preoccupation from potential employers?

Basil needed work. His landlord was already hounding him about overdue rent, indifferent to explanations about rocketing dues at the health club. Even at the club he was in arrears for locker fees. Threats had been made. Basil saw the writing on the wall. It was time to quit his romance with Synchronous Swimming and the only way to quit was cold turkey. His eyes filled with tears. He shook off his despair. "I think we'll cancel tomorrow's practice," he told his partner. "We can work on the groin contortions and knee dimpling another day. Why don't you go to a movie or something? We could both use a break."

"You're dumping me?" his partner said.

"I need to think things out," Basil said.

"You're throwing in the towel?"

"They won't even give me a towel, not unless I come up with the cash. Look, this is nothing personal. Worse case scenario, you find another partner. *Sic transit.*"

"Just like that," his partner said.

"I'm afraid so," Basil said.

"No severance, no nothing?"

"You're freelance. There was never any confusion about that. No severance. No pension. I created you for my convenience and for the moment you've become inconvenient. That's not to say conditions won't

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change. Meanwhile, you're not being rejected. You're being downsized. So long and good luck."

"Not so easy. There's some question about who created who."

"No question whatsoever. Not a hint of any question. Don't make this harder than it already is."

"We'd better go down to the pool."

"It's past nine o'clock. The pool's closed. I can't indulge you even if I wanted to which I do not."

"One last and final swim together," his partner said. "You owe me that. Closure."

"I hate the word *closure*. There's no such animal."

"There's closure if you insist on it. Like God. You do realize I can make trouble for you. I could pop up during those high power interviews of yours. Or slide between you and whoever when you're having sex."

"I hate the expression *having sex* as much as I hate the word closure," Basil said. "And I'm beginning to dislike you. I'm amazed at your attitude. If things were turned around, if it was you handing me my walking papers, I hope I'd behave with more dignity."

"You probably would. So what? One last swim?"

Basil considered his options. It was true that his invisible partner could complicate his life like some angry, unpredictable haunt. It was more prudent to send her away contented. He had been abrupt with her, too heavy-handed. She deserved some gesture of appreciation. "One last swim then."

The Buff Fitness Center, tucked into a corner of a huge shopping mall, was dark and locked tight. Basil squeezed through the narrow alley that separated the complex from an International House of Pancakes. It led to the pool area defended by a high mesh fence. A nasty breeze roiled chilly air. He could hear water slosh against tile. With the heating system turned off and the wind blowing, the tiles would feel like ice and the water would startle his muscles. Synchronous Swimming was not for the cramped. "Maybe this should wait for tomorrow," he said. "I have an ominous feeling. They might have security cameras. Some watchman might hear you splashing."

"Splashing? What a dirty thing to say to me. When's the last time you heard me splash? The first thing you taught me was to slither like an eel, that splashing costs points."

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"The hell with it," Basil said, frustrated by her mewling. "Let's get it over with." He began climbing the fence using his fingers and toes for grips. She climbed beside him.

"Nicely done," his partner said when they dropped down at poolside.

"I used to climb into the school playground," Basil said. "This was nothing compared to that."

"There's so much I don't know about you," his partner said. "We've been together so long and we're strangers. It makes you wonder."

"Wonder on your own time. Let's get wet."

"Don't you wonder about me? You pulled me out of the void. I didn't know so much as the dead man's float when you dragged me down here the first time. We've come a long way together."

"You were a blank canvas. That's how I wanted it," Basil said. "One thing I can say, you always had spirit. Moxie. And you are a quick study. For somebody who never even heard of Synchronous Swimming you rose to the bait."

"I have a confession to make."

"Good. Go to church. Now get in the water. Instead of working through the usual routine, let's improvise. I'll follow your moves for twelve beats, then you follow mine. Be spontaneous. We've nobody to please but ourselves."

"I did know a thing or two before we met," his partner said softly. It wasn't her usual rat-tat-tat voice. "I knew a lot. Basil, don't hate me. Don't sulk or attack. Hear me out. Back home I'm considered rather proficient at Synchronous Swimming. In fact, I have five gold Spirals, three silvers and a bronze."

"You also have a sense of humor," Basil said. "Ha ha. Ho ho. Five golds, three silvers and a bronze — what was it, Spirals — back home? You came from inside my head. If you won any medals you won them between my ears. Maybe I did allow myself to imagine a few grandiose victories but don't make the mistake of confusing my hubris with your reality. Please, slither into the pool and out of my life."

"You must know we monitor this planet. You must realize we consider your species armed and dangerous. There've been enough books and bad movies about that."

"*We* monitor your planet?" Basil said. "What *we*?"

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"We. Us. Them. You know. From out there. I was a Senior Celestial Observer before I became a professional athlete. I introduced my people to Synchronous Swimming after seeing it on your television. At first we considered the sport as comic relief. Then — God knows why — it caught on like crazy. Everyone got into it. Finally it was accepted by the Committee on Intergalactic Commonality as a Valid Clash. It became an official event in the Rotational Games."

"You're telling me you're an award-winning alien who watched Earthlings swim synchronously? That's what they paid you for?"

"Exactly. And lucky for you. That's how I convinced them to accept the test."

"What test, if you don't mind telling me?"

"The more things get out of hand down here, the more your technology advances beyond your capacity to cope, the more public opinion swings toward termination. They want to eliminate Planet Earth not so much as a potential menace but as an embarrassment."

"Do tell?" Basil said. "Fancy that. I amaze myself. How did I allow you to become such a developed fantasy? I need help. Therapy the minute I can afford it. Talk about embarrassments to the universe."

"At the last meeting of the Council I was the only one who spoke out in favor of restraint. I told them that if there was any possibility of even a single Earthling learning to swim synchronously, demonstrate any possibility of Cosmic Integration, it would be wrong to junk a perfectly nice planet. They respect me, Basil. I told you, nine Spirals and still so young. So they agreed to send me here to find a partner for next year's Rotational Game. I knew it was a risk. It could cost me a sixth gold. Still, I accepted the challenge. That's the kind of woman I am."

"And you picked me?"

"Not exactly. A computer picked you. It could have been anyone. Didn't it strike you as peculiar, your sudden avid interest in Synchronous Swimming?"

"Not really," Basil said. "There's a strain of insanity in my family. Besides, I was sweetly saddened by the attempt of two humans to paddle harmoniously, doomed to failure, of course, by the twin pulls of ego and gravity, not to mention gender-related discrepancies. Then there was the factor of amazing grace."

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"You think you thought that up by yourself? I put those ideas into your pedestrian brain. Look, Basil, you can walk away right now. Or you can take the plunge, give Earth one more chance. You'll probably destroy yourselves anyhow but if you send me back alone there's no *probably* because we'll do it definitely. It could get ugly. Sometimes they leave renegade rock-rendering to the kids. They say it builds character."

"Tell me about those Rotational Games."

"What can I say? They're magnificent. Maybe a tad vulgar by purist standards but thousands of fans from the Sixteen Solar Quadrants pack the stadium. Everybody else watches from home. Glitz and glory. The winners win big, they get the Spirals and perks, losers get nice parting gifts. So, are you in or out?"

"How do you rate our chances?"

"To take home a Spiral? We'd have the underdog's advantage. And a certain freakish charm. The crowd might be with us. Except for the fundamentalists and some of the military. The rest depends on how far I can take you in the next few months. You do have a way to go."

"Which way is that? I haven't the slightest conception of what you look like, of how we'd look in tandem."

"I suppose you deserve a look at the merchandise. I hope you're not overwhelmed by beauty. That could be a negative."

"I think I can survive your dazzle," Basil said.

"I wasn't being cute," his partner said. "Without boasting, I am very gorgeous. It's an accident of nature and nothing I take credit for. The opposite. My motivation to cop those Spirals came from a kind of backlash. I always got everything I wanted because of my kick-ass looks, not for anything I said or did. I wanted to earn the adoration for a change."

"I always suspected you were well fashioned," Basil said. "Not that I thought too much about it. Your only function was to be my lead pony. Besides, I'm a spiritual kind of person."

"Spiritual? I've seen you dribbling over Victoria's Secret catalogs. You go into a kind of comatose catatonia. The females in that catalogue are stuffed eggplants compared with me and I don't need you wasting seminal energy falling in lust or love. I like a little awe and wonder, it goes with the territory, but nothing excessive."

"Madam, I still think you're a figment of my imagination. As such, I

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feel entirely capable of resisting whatever lubricious meringue you toss at me. Your move."

Basil was blinded by a flash of pure white light and deafened by what sounded like the crackle of a ton of cellophane wrap. When his eyes focused and his ears cleared, he looked around and saw nothing, which was what he expected to see. His hallucination was finished, exorcised. He could go home now and return to a recognizably mundane existence, just another guy trying to keep a modicum of balance on his whirling planet's crust. "Good-bye and good riddance," he said. Then he felt a tap at his left calf. Basil turned around. Still nothing. He felt another tap and looked down.

"Me," his partner said. She was three feet tall, the color of a ripe mango. Five tentacles hung from what he took to be her chest. Nine arms protruded from her compact frame, each ending in a pincer hand. Her one leg, thick as a tree trunk, was a series of silver coils. Her face, which seemed to be smiling, was the prow of a blimp head that swiveled on a thin, yellow stalk. A thick blue tongue swung like a pendulum from a fanged cave of mouth. He counted seventeen tiny eyes, some blue, some black, some brown, some gray, some a rainbow mix. The only thing that resembled any clothing was a radish-red furry beret jauntily tilted over a large, twitching ear.

"Holy shit," Basil said. "Jesus H. Christ."

"I warned you," she said. "Now that we've gotten past mystery, I think we should gird up our loins and buckle down to work."

"Which loins do you gird up? I'm not being snide. I have an inquiring mind."

"You are being vulgar. Let's concentrate on basics and leave the fancy stuff for later. Our water back home is a bit slimy, about the consistency of your mushroom and barley soup, so we might as well hold back on the frills until I get you to my world. But while we're waiting for transport we could try a few slow laps."

"Excuse me," Basil said, "but this is about Synchronous Swimming. Synchronous Swimming is about swimming synchronously. Two bodies moving as one buoyed up by a lovely liquid lift, two essences flowing together, a delicious metaphor for terrific sex."

"Tell me something I don't know."

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"The marriage of jigsaw pieces, the orgiastic moment of their snapping together tantalizingly delayed."

"No argument there, Basil."

"Which brings me to a bit of a creative crisis. You and I...By the way, what's your name? I never gave you a name."

"Oid Flxy. My parents liked Biblical names."

"Oid, to become supremely compatible it could be argued that a couple should be fairly compatible to begin with. Don't misunderstand. I have nothing against tentacles, multiple arms and eyes, a zeppelin cranium and so forth but frankly, I worry that it might be difficult to convince a panel of judges that we're in synch."

"We do have a lot in common," his partner said. "We are devoted to the sport. That's a starting point. Give or take my own disappointment over your simplistic instrument, which I don't hold against you."

"There's my worry. That you can't hold it against me," Basil said. "We might be terminally incompatible."

"You've got to transcend those feelings of inferiority, Basil. That insecurity plagues your whole species. It might be the reason for all your bloody wars and occasional massacres. Set your sights higher. You've got to. If we don't make a respectable show of it, Earth is yesterday's news."

"But how can we choreograph the illusion of symmetry if nothing fits?"

"You suck in your gut, I retract my tentacles. Give a little, take a little. Our judges are tough but open-minded. They might give us the benefit of the doubt. Then again, who can say? They can be vicious. But there is an appeal in asymmetric synchronicity."

"A limited appeal. Synchronous Swimming might not be the fairest test for Earth's endurance. Maybe croquet? Wrestling? Extreme Polo?"

"Too late. We swim together or you sink. Who puts what where is something to be worked out. We have an hour before we're scheduled for transportation. Might as well make the most of it."

His partner jumped into the pool. Basil watched her do some somersaults. That this was the woman he'd been swimming with for nearly a year was inconceivable. Invisible, she seemed the ideal match for him, tuned to his every flip and frisson. Now, with so much at stake, seeing was unbelieving. On the other hand, Basil thought, if his rhomboids were

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educated to respond to the declension of what seemed to be her nose, if his clavicle could learn to truncate to her dorsal carapace, who knows?

"It's ironic," Basil said. "Truth be told, I never wanted a partner. I was a victim of my own inner peer pressure. Synchronous Swimming gets a bum rap as it is and if you tell people, even tell yourself, that you're in the sport as a loner, it sounds indulgent."

"I know what you mean," his partner said.

"Which brings me to another question. What happened to your last partner? If you two were busy winning Spirals, he must have been a tad shocked when you dumped him."

"I didn't dump him, I absorbed him. We have this capacity for spontaneous absorption. At least our females do. When things get really synchronous it just happens. Every profession has its hazards. We've got to be very careful to integrate some fragment of clash into our repertoire, some burr of friction without compromising score. You wouldn't want to be absorbed in the middle of a performance."

"This absorption, I assume, is reversible?"

"It's terminal. Probably painless, though."

"Painless is good," Basil said.

He wanted to ask her about the closing ceremony at the Rotational Games, to describe a Spiral, or, if they managed to pull it off, whether "The Star Spangled Banner" would be played while their victorious flags rose. He decided to leave those answers to his imagination and belly flopped into the frosty water. She swam toward him, being as synchronous as could be expected.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

THE TIMEX MACHINE

IT WAS WITH some trepidation that I, Herbert George Wells, set forth from the year 1895 into the future, this time in order to view a motion picture based upon my novel, *The Time Machine*, and directed by my great-grandson Simon. I had, during a previous visit, viewed Mr. George Pal's spirited but trashy attempt at filming my little book, and there was a correspondence between the two productions that gave me pause — the casting of an Australian actor in the lead. I had found Mr. Pal's choice for the role, Rod Taylor, to have the emotive capacity of mutton, and I feared that this new Australian incarnation, Guy Pearce, would also prove unequal to my conception of the character. Why this insistence on a colonial? I wondered. Why not an Englishman to play an Englishman (or an American, for it turns out that the Time Traveller has been recast as a resident of New York City)? It seems one should expect this much respect for one's work from a relation, no matter how distant and devoid of traditional values he may be.

I prefer to use the time machine for serious business, but I must confess that on my several journeys to the late 20th and early 21st centuries, I have developed a fondness for the motion picture, especially for those films treating of time travel. This is not to say that I have thought many worthwhile. Of them all, only *Time After Time*, whose conceit was to detail one of my earliest temporal expeditions, featuring the excellent Malcolm McDowell, possessed the least verisimilitude and charm; though even this film roused in me no little revulsion with its insistence that my

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dear friend, the late Dr. ___, a gentle, inquiring soul, was none other than Jack the Ripper. *Somewhere in Time*, starring Christopher Reeve, was, I suppose, a harmless enough love story, poignant in an overly sugared fashion, but its lack of scientific rigor was dismaying. As for the rest, my God!, the idea of a simple tale told well appears to have eluded those who dictate the policies that command the industry responsible for these gaudy idiocies. Still, I cannot deny a certain admiration for the technical aspects of such films. Judging by the size of the explosions they generate, a studio such as DreamWorks might well be capable, should they effect a journey back to the 19th century, of conquering a considerable portion of the globe.

In relating my experience of my great-grandson's film, I must first state that I understand this century's expectations of its entertainments are not those of my own. Every age demands certain elements designed to appease the public mind, just as in the Elizabethan era the Bard himself was induced to leaven his masterpieces with low comedy so as to delight the groundlings; and thus I assumed what I was about to see would not be a faithful rendering of my book, but rather a different work entirely, one infused with the spirit of the thing. I did not expect, however, the amalgam of illogic and hyperkinetic foolishness with which my eye was met. Even for those who have read my book, it will be necessary to recount the plot of the motion picture, for it differs widely from that of my quiet story.

Alexander Hartdegen (Pearce) is a college professor whose attention is given over to two interests: the nature of time and the romantic pursuit of a young woman, Emma (Sienna Guillory). When Emma is killed by a thief in Central Park, Hartdegen becomes obsessed with building a time machine so he can travel into the past and prevent her death. After four years of maniacal work, he succeeds in his objective, returns to the moment when he met Emma in the park and steers her away from the place, only to have her killed by a runaway hansom cab. At this juncture Hartdegen decides that the past in unalterable. Having been in love on several occasions, most notably with the director's great-grandmother, I insist that obsession should be made of sterner stuff. Had I been in Hartdegen's shoes, I would tried in the service of love to alter the past at least a few more times; in fact, I

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likely would have exhausted myself in the process (it occurs to me that such an exhaustive process, Hartdegen attempting again and again to save Emma, ludicrous though it might appear, would have made a more compelling film than the one I saw). But Hartdegen, obeying a hastily conceived logic, determines that it would be best to travel into the future in hopes of finding a solution to the problem. During a stopover in the 21st century, he discovers that the Moon has been destroyed by subsurface excavation and debris is pelting down upon the Earth. In his haste to escape emergency workers who want to take him to a place of safety, he is rendered unconscious as he throws himself into the time machine and inadvertently sends it forward into the distant future.

My great-grandson's redefinition of the lotus-eating Eloi and the feral subterranean-dwelling Morlocks, those two strains into which I imagined the human race might diverge by the year 802,007, does not reflect my intention that they emblematize the class struggle between the poor and the wealthy. Stripped of symbolic weight, lacking the gravity of social speculation, this division now strikes me as somewhat arbitrary. Beyond that, the Eloi are scarcely the childlike, docile creatures I imagined. On the contrary, they are exceptionally athletic and well-muscled, in aspect rather like a thriving tribe of South Sea Islanders. Further they are skilled with primitive weapons and have constructed an aesthetically spectacular village that clings to the cliffsides of a gorge, protected from the elements by shell-like canopies. That my great-grandson's conception of the Eloi differs from my own does not of itself perturb me, but the Morlocks...there is another story. Though for the most part appropriately bestial, they are led by an uber-Morlock portrayed by Jeremy Irons who, done up as an albino with an augmented spinal cord protruding from his skin, has now added an inglorious footnote to a generally illustrious career. It is this addition to my story that utterly derailed the reasonable progress of the film. When Hartdegen invades the Morlocks' underground complex to rescue Mara (Samantha Mumba), the lovely Eloi woman who befriended him and who has since been captured, Irons informs him that the Morlocks live beneath the ground because they cannot endure the light of the sun (this flying in the face of the fact that Morlock hunting parties

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routinely go out during the day to kill and enslave the Eloi). He goes on to say that he can control the thoughts of both Eloi and Morlocks alike, and that while the majority of the Eloi are eaten by their captors, women such as the beauteous Mara are utilized for breeding purposes. Upon hearing this, I wondered why — if the uber-Morlock possessed such powers — he simply did not summon the Eloi to their fate rather than sending his minions to hunt them down. Did they need the exercise? Just for fun? I also wondered where were the Morlock women? Could my great-grandson be so degraded in his intellect as to conceive of a sub-species without females? Was this ridiculous conclusion the narrative justification for the kidnapping of comely Eloi women? It must be so, for otherwise a Morlock would probably not consider such women attractive...unless some Morlock advertising agency had so distorted these poor monsters' sense of self-esteem that their notion of beauty disincluded their own kind.

Even greater gaps of logic were at hand. After engaging in an absurd fight with the uber-Morlock, during which Irons hangs half-in, half-out of the bubble of force enclosing the time machine as it accelerates into the future, a circumstance that would likely have impeded its operation substantially, Hartdegen travels to an age in which the Morlocks have gained absolute dominance. As if they had not already done so. There he decides that while he cannot change the past, he can change the future. This judgment, made while in the future concerning the past, meets no rational standard with which I am familiar. I would hazard to guess that from whichever direction one approaches it, time is either unalterable or it is not. Nevertheless, Hartdegen returns to rescue Mara from the caverns, leaving behind the time machine — which he has set to explode — and they escape into the surrounding hills. This hitherto unhinted-at explosive capacity is a wondrous thing, for not only does the machine produce a considerable pyrotechnic display, but — as if it had a mind of its own — the explosion manages with surgical precision to annihilate the Morlock caverns without spreading destruction to any other precinct.

Every work of the imagination, my own not excepted, is afflicted with logical imperfections. It is the job of the craftsman to direct the reader's or the viewer's attention away from these flaws by dint of his

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skill at narration. One of the tools that can effect such a sleight-of-hand is pacing, and if *The Time Machine* had been well paced, its logical gaffes might not have seemed so glaring. But under my great-grandson's aimless direction, the story does not build so much as it drearily accumulates. Nor does the acting distract from the film's relentless stupidity. Though Mr. Pearce has previously turned in admirable performances in *LA Confidential* and *Memento*, I must now infer that these performances were extracted from him by talented directors, an asset with which he was not blessed while making *The Time Machine*. Rather than acting, he appears to be doing a series of impressions, all of them inept. His evocation of a man in love is particularly grotesque — bug-eyed, gaping, as if the emotion were no more than a kind of inflamed earnestness. Special effects, too, tend to gloss over logical errors, but *Machine*'s special effects were of uneven quality. Rumor has it that following a number of unenthusiastically received test screenings, 20 million dollars' worth of extra effects were added at the last moment — as a result they are not up to the standard set by various other recent films.

As I stood in the lobby afterward, observing the streams of children exiting the theater, idly wondering which of them might — should my scenario of the future come to pass — become the ancestors of Eloi and which might produce Morlocks, I grew irate at this perversion of my work. Not only had one of my descendants savaged my book, he had created a work of such joyless and debased intelligence, it might well add some crucial bit of momentum to the flow of history and assist in the creation of a world like that I had envisioned, one in which the human mind has been rendered useless for anything except the most rudimentary of gratifications. Thus it was I determined that on my return to the past I will not seek to consummate my relationship with the woman who was to have been my second wife, Simon Wells's great-grandmother. Though my feelings for her remain strong, the attraction has been dimmed by my recent experience, and the loss of her affections is not too great a sacrifice if I can expunge this excrescence from the record of history. Should the fabric of time prove resistant to alteration, I will refuse to submit so easily to that rule as did Alex Hartdegen. And if I should fail, well, perhaps the

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record of my failure will achieve some small benefit. But then it may be too late for action. Intellects cool and vast may already be watching us from afar, preparing to strike so as to prevent my great-grandson from ransacking the remainder of my legacy. Even Martians, I believe, would prefer an ultimate anonymity to enduring the puerile reimagining that he might visit upon them.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

IT LOOKS AS THOUGH the cover story for our September issue will be "The Majesty of Angels," a new story by Robert Reed that's best described as "cosmic." It looks as though this story will get *two* cover illustrations—pick up next month's issue to see for yourself.

We also expect to include John Langan's homage to Henry James, "Mr. Gaunt," as remarkable a tale from the dark side as we've seen in some time. Other stories coming soon include a new Kedrigern story by John Morressy, Esther Friesner's tale of a phi beta kappa, and a new novelet by Tanith Lee.

For our October/November annual double issue, we plan to bring you Lucius Shepard's latest venture into Latin America, a lush fantasy by the title of "The Drive-In Puerto Rico."

Our cover price is due to increase soon, so now's a good time to subscribe and insure that you won't miss any of the coming issues.

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In the early days of science fiction, the alternate history was something of a rarity; nowadays, it's one of the most popular forms of science fiction, with dozens of original novels and stories adding to the body of work. A recent survey of the subgenre, aided greatly by the Website www.uchronia.net, suggests that the two most popular topics are the US Civil War and World War II. Charlie Finlay's story turns the clock back further, back to the early days of this nation for a look at What Might Have Been.

We Come Not to Praise Washington

By Charles Coleman Finlay

THE ASHEN SKY QUICKENED toward sunrise, skipping shards of slate-gray light across the Schuylkill River. The little skiff carried three men, one rowing, one steering, and one bailing water as fast as he could to keep it afloat.

A young black man, Gabriel, pulled at the oars with strength he'd acquired as a blacksmith. He watched the other two closely. He hadn't met them until the night before.

The middle-aged man who steered the boat was named Barr or Bear, something like that. He was slender and wore a prim blue military coat and a borrowed boatman's cap pushed back on his high forehead. "Keep the powder dry," he said.

"It's long sin' anyone had cause to remind me o' that," chuckled the gaunt-cheeked old man who squatted in the middle of the boat. Lank, pale hair showed under his ratty foxskin hat. "No, this is a horn of the fine grain, and I guard it as if my own life depent on it, which it has."

He dipped a cup constantly as he spoke, a splash in the boat and a

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splash over the side, a steady sound between the longer creak-and-sluicing rhythm of the oars.

The man in the blue coat shifted his feet, scraping a flat wooden box across the bottom of the boat to a drier spot. He said nothing else.

Gabriel tilted his head downstream. "That the ferry bridge?" he asked, southern accent grating against the old man's Yankee twang. "If we run agin it, we can jest climb out and walk the rest of the way."

The other two gazed at the dark line across the river but Gabriel gritted his teeth and pulled harder. The sinking craft escaped the main current into slower waters. The man in the blue coat steered the boat away from the bridge and nosed it into reeds along the shore.

The old man grabbed his long-barreled rifle and leapt out. He sank in the water and mud, soaking the fringe on his deerskin coat as he waded up to the bank. The blacksmith stowed the oars and stood in the water, steadying the boat while the third man retrieved his box, stepped to the bow, and jumped gracefully onto the dry shore. Once there, he flicked open a latch and lifted the lid to reveal two dueling pistols and their accouterments.

"Nathaniel," he said.

"Anan?" replied the old man.

"I had meant my powder."

Nathaniel shuffled his feet, then ducked his head. "Yes, sir, Colonel Burr."

Burr — that was it. Burr pulled a handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket and wiped the box dry, then closed it again. He regarded the other two men and frowned. "Nathaniel and Gabriel, a prophet and an angel. How very fitting."

The old man mumbled something in protest. Gabriel winced and said, under his breath, "Didn't end up here by being no angel, no suh."

Far off, over the fields, a bird began to sing.

Burr faced that simple music. "It was our goal to enter Philadelphia unremarked sometime before dawn; let us falter not with the goal so near at hand."

Gabriel considered his muddied cotton breeches and the ruination of what was left of his good plaid hose. His feet were sore. "If you say so, suh."

Nathaniel led the way as scout.

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Gabriel looked one last time at the dark bulk of the bridge against the sky. He thought he saw a man lean on the railing at the toll-house end — the ferryman had spied them.

He turned away from that mute and possibly imagined witness to follow the others.

A few tall spires thrust above the leafless treeline to spike the gun-iron sky. The air was chill and moist. The open ground beneath their feet soon grew uneven, like a field harrowed and left fallow.

"Wrong season o' the year to be a-planting," Nathaniel said, giving voice to the same thought Gabriel had.

"These are the burying fields," Burr explained, "where the late victims of the yellow fever were so promiscuously and unceremoniously interred."

Nathaniel twisted his mouth. "Hell of a crop if it sprouts."

Gabriel snorted, but he also studied the field more closely. He'd been planning a slave revolt with his brothers and the help of others in Virginia before he had to run. They intended to kill hundreds, even thousands of whites; he hadn't given any thought to burying them. "This where the Washington, he buried then?"

"We should be so fortunate," said Burr.

"I mean the first Washington, not the new one, he ruling now."

"I comprehended your meaning well enough." Burr's voice sounded bitter. "Washington was as ignorant and illiterate as any pauper, but there's little chance that he'd be buried among them."

Gabriel's jaw tightened. "You say so?"

They took several more paces in silence. Then Burr said, more moderately, "Washington was a good leader, especially in peace. But he died in '93. These graves are more recent, from last year's return of the epidemic."

They came to a road. Gabriel kicked the mud from his shoes.

Even on the outskirts of town, Gabriel saw several mansions larger than his master Thomas's new townhouse on Clay Street. But then Richmond was the capital of a state, and Philadelphia of a whole nation.

A few people passed silently like ghosts through the slumbering

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streets while farm wagons rattled in the distance on their way to market. Burr pulled his hat down over his face. Although he stood several inches taller and wider than the old hunter, Gabriel walked behind Nathaniel in order to hide himself.

Burr led them purposefully into the city center. Houses of all sizes crowded the tree-lined, cobbled streets. A sign at an intersection proclaimed "Mulberry Street." Gabriel didn't let on he could read it — despite Burr's opinion of illiterates, you were better off if white folks didn't know you could read and write.

They turned at a narrow alley and stopped, pressing themselves up against a white-washed fence to let a woman pass with her child. She carried a large bundle of clean laundry. A handkerchief wrapped around her nose and mouth stank of vinegar. Her little barefoot boy, maybe five or six years old, clutched a smoking cigar in his fist.

Burr tipped his hat to the woman, while Gabriel met Nathaniel's eyes.

"City gals wear some strange parfumes," Nathaniel said.

"Uh-huh," Gabriel answered, liking the old hunter more. "But her husband he ought to stop smoking — it done stunted his growth."

They both laughed. Burr spun on them. "Vinegar and smoke are supposed to keep off the plague. It's past season for it, but some of those poor unfortunates who've lost their families and means of support are strangely afflicted by events and cope as well as they can. They deserve our sympathy, not our mockery."

Gabriel made his face blank. "Yes, suh. Jest like you say."

"Anan," Nathaniel said.

Burr nodded. He led them to a tiny house, another plain wooden box among a row of boxes. Morning light suffused the sky as he tapped on the door. After no response, he knocked harder.

A woman peeked through the faded curtains of the window by the door. Amid the shuffling inside, Gabriel heard the phrase, "It's my husband."

He squeezed his hands into fists and eased over to the side of the house where he watched a tall, whiskered man climb out the side window in his pants, suspenders dangling, boots and shirt tucked under his arm. He looked over to Burr, who lifted his hand and motioned sharply, once, for Gabriel to come back.

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Gabriel thought about some other man taking liberty with his wife, Nanny, and then stepped back anyway. Burr could make his own choices.

The woman opened the door halfway, smoothing her dress over her legs, then running her hand through her hair. Her face was pretty but her clothes threadbare and her hair thin and uncombed. She ducked her head at Burr and smiled nervously.

"Hello, Mister — "

Burr interrupted her with a finger to his lips. "Please, Betty, discretion is of the essence, more than ever."

She looked over the two other men. "My, uh, husband isn't home, now," she said. "He's off visiting Mr. Mervyn. But if you'd like to come inside."

"Very much so, and our deepest appreciation for your hospitality. These gentlemen accompany me on my business — "

Gabriel boggled a moment when he realized he'd just been referred to as a gentleman, but he showed no outward sign of it.

" — and I beg your indulgence in permitting them inside also."

"They are most certainly welcome," she said, her voice trembling. "I shall put on some water for tea." She pushed the door open and gestured them within.

Gabriel ducked his head coming through the door. The cottage was one small room not unlike the slave cabins. The plaster walls were cracked, and it had a wood floor instead of dirt, although the boards were loose, with gaping seams, and uneven. But it was clean, and tidy, and much like his own place except for the curtained bed in one corner. Like the woman, it appeared to be a relic of more prosperous dwellings and times.

"We may need accommodation here for a few days, Betty," Burr said, "if that's satisfactory to you. To your husband, I mean."

"Oh, yes. I — I don't know when he shall return." She put a teapot on the fire. "It could be any day now. He may be coming back with Washington. He meant to talk to President Washington about Mr. Mervyn's illness. The President caught the sickness too, you know, the year after the election."

Burr closed the shutters on the window where the other man had escaped. "Yes, I know."

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They looked at each other. She went over to Burr and swept her fingertips along his forearm. He pulled her close, embraced her, and, turning his back toward the other two men, brushed the hair away from her mouth. "I'm sorry," he said very quietly, "for the loss of your old house, that I couldn't do more." Then he led her over to the bed and sat on the edge of it with her, pulling the curtains closed as they began to talk.

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow at Gabriel. There was a pine table and rush chairs where they could sit, but Gabriel stepped over to the door. The hunter followed him.

They sat on the front stoop of the house. Nathaniel uncorked his canteen and drank. He offered it to Gabriel, who sniffed it first. Didn't smell like alcohol, more the shame. He tipped his head back and swallowed warm water.

Morning light revealed many of the houses on the alley were abandoned. Gabriel had heard the plague hit the city hard, but it was another thing to see it. They sat there quietly for a while. Finally, Nathaniel shook his head. "Don't care much for cities."

Gabriel grunted noncommittally. "What do you think — " he nodded his head in the direction of the house, " — wants us for?"

Nathaniel thought about his answer for a long time. "Great men is that way. It ain't doing the thing that's as important to them as to be seen doing it. And there warn't nobody to see him doing anything much in Templeton, where'n we was."

"He a great man then?"

"I seen a few, red and white, in my years. The colonel's as brave as any o' them."

"How'd you end up with him?"

"I was sent to jail for shooting deer out o' season. Well, that and calling the judge a tomfool in his own courtroom, after him accusing me o' being with the rebels and helping the French, when the last time I saw the inside of a blockhouse was nigh hand to Frontinac in 'fifty-eight, which as the French took me and sixty-one other fellers prisoner."

He lifted his head. His eyes were red-rimmed and gummy.

"Anyhow," he continued, "the colonel was visiting old preacher Peck, he's the congressman from Templeton there, a Jefferson man, and went to court to plead for me." His voice choked up. "'For an old vet'ran,'

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he said. And he won my case too, seeing as how I been hunting deer in them woods sin' that judge was in diapers and have a right to it. So when he asked me to come to Pennsylvany with him, for a purpose, I gave him my hand on it. The fuse is near out on my time in this world anyhow, and I'd rather die a free man than locked up in a jail."

"Now that's the Bible truth," Gabriel said.

"And you? You from that town, Devon?"

"No," said Gabriel. Devon was the town they'd met in yesterday and set out from the night before. "That blacksmith, Pomp Cozzens, he — "

"The negro feller who served in the Malcoms under the Colonel?"

"That the one." He still tried to imagine that, a slave serving in the revolution to earn his freedom. But times were different then. "He was jest putting me up a stay. He said if I helped out," he nodded his head at the house again, "that he'd help me find some place up north to live, and some work."

Nathaniel looked him over carefully. "You a runaway?"

He was, but it didn't do no good to say it. "I kilt a man."

He meant to let this white man know he'd protect himself if he had to. But the hunter only nodded. "Either way, either way. Killed a few men myself, and not all of them Mingoes. Some men deserve killing."

The door cracked open behind them. "I daresay some need it sooner rather than later to spare the world its surplus of trouble," said Burr, his shirt untucked. He pinched the bridge of his nose and grimaced. "Come inside and rest a while so we can go looking for news of Washington."

Gabriel rose and went in, wondering what he'd got himself into.

HE AWOKE from his spot on the floor and looked at the fall of the light to check the time — not yet noon. Then, recollecting where he was, he sat up.

Burr lay clothed on the bed, looking pale as he softly rubbed his temples. Nathaniel crouched on the floor beside him, rifle across his legs, listening intently to whispered instructions.

"I kin still hit a deer at a hundred paces, I tell you," he said, patting the butt of his weapon.

"Here you are," Betty said quietly.

Gabriel looked up as she offered him a bowl and spoon. "Thank you, ma'am," he said.

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"It's polenta, if that's all right. Before my husband found Mr. Mervyn sick with the plague and brought him into our home, I could have — "

"It be fine," he said, spooning some into his mouth. Corn samp, whatever she called it. He liked it better with fat slices or bacon in it, but the familiar flavor made him feel momentarily at home in this odd place among these strangers. "Tastes fine."

Betty reached out suddenly and stroked his head, sending a chill down his spine. Then she pulled her hand back, just as quick, and smoothed her skirt. "Keep your voice low and soothing, if you can," she said. "He has one of his debilitating headaches, and may not rise for some time — a day or so."

Burr raised himself up on an elbow to refute her assessment and proved it by falling back again. "I'll be up this evening," he said weakly. "I've come too far. It's past time to see this through."

Nathaniel stared at the window, grim and caged.

An old bumpkin, an invalid, and a crazy widow — it was a bad bunch to trust his life to, thought Gabriel. "Missus," he said to Betty, halting her steps toward Burr. He lifted the bowl. "There be any more where that came from?"

Burr forced himself to rise at dusk. His hands shook as he drank a cup of tea. "We're only venturing out to reconnoiter, for news and the mood of the city," he said, "so I'd much prefer it that you leave your rifle behind, Nathaniel."

The old man sucked in his mouth, then nodded.

Gabriel had been making swords at the forge, for their rebellion, which was the only weapon he'd ever handled but his fists. He wasn't afraid to use his fists though.

With his cap once again pulled down over his face, Burr led the way quickly and purposefully through the streets. He set a brisk pace, as if to prove he was no longer sick.

They passed through blocks of houses, and churches, and long brick walls, and huge buildings with columns like he'd never seen before, made all out of stone. The country market stalls on High Street were as big as tobacco barns, stretching on for three blocks, with road on either side and more buildings for as far as the eye could see. Gabriel knew Virginia pretty

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well, and thought it big enough, but the country just grew bigger. He'd meant to free all the slaves, and for him that meant all the slaves in Virginia. Now that seemed like a small part of the whole.

People strolled around and under the stalls, conversing, and he worried about being recognized again. A pair of servant girls, their dark faces framed by pasteboard bonnets, stared at him — the hair twitched on the back of his neck and his shoulders tightened. The girls leaned in to whisper to one another, giggling, and he relaxed again. No, nobody knew him here.

Past the stalls, a lamplighter made his way down the street, stringing beads of orange light atop the line of lamp posts. Burr led them over one more block, where they came to a three-and-a-half-story brick hotel. Noise and light leaked from the windows. The sign above the door read "The Queen's Inn" with a smaller sign below that said "Horatio Wade Proprietor" all in one line. The last word stumped Gabriel a moment. They stepped past a round-shouldered black man as he unloaded split wood from a cart onto the boardwalk out front.

"Come here," said Burr, standing at the door. His lips were thin, with lines around his mouth. He looked to both of them, but his eyes fell longest on Gabriel. "There's a chance I may be recognized and must avail myself of a hasty exit. Make sure I get through the door, then delay any pursuers, and we'll meet up again at Betty's residence."

"Yes, suh," Gabriel said.

"Anan," answered the hunter.

They went inside. Burr pushed his way over to the bar while Nathaniel and Gabriel remained in the foyer. The common room was crowded with men smoking cigars, playing whist, and arguing. A waitress weaved her way among the tables. On the stage at the far end of the room, a man in shirtsleeves finished a tune on a German flute, drank from a cup, then raised it high in the air. He began to sing in a clear, melodic voice:

"To Anacreon in Heaven...."

A brief silence fell, then a cheer, and the anthem was taken up, mostly by a group of smooth-faced young men in mismatched military uniforms.

The door creaked behind them. The woodcarter shouldered his way past them, stopped for a moment at the bar, interrupting Burr's conversation to talk to the proprietor.

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"...and there, with good fellows we'll learn to entwine, the myrtle of Venus with Bacchus's Vine!"

The singers grew so rowdy at that line that some of the military boys stood up from their table. The woodcarter paused to grin at Gabriel as he returned to the door.

"You standing there in those raggedy ole clothes, look like a scarecrow. You best be careful, fo' somebody mistakes you fo' a runaway."

Gabriel clenched his fists. "You best be careful you mouth, talking that trash to them you don't know."

"Uh-huh. You be careful your mouth, too, scarecrow. I saw your lips moving, you reading that sign out front. Where you learn to read?"

"T'ain't none of your business," said Gabriel, and he meant to say more, but then Nathaniel's voice caught his attention.

"Take your hands offa me, you varmints!"

The group of young men pressed Nathaniel against the wall. He had one hand cocked back in a fist and used the other to slap away another's grasp.

"Who are you to give us orders, leatherstocking?" said one.

"Are you spyin' on us, for the rebels out west?" asked another, grabbing and twisting the old man's arm. "Out with it!"

"We'll take him outside and get the truth out of him," said the third, in a voice a little too shrill, as he yanked hard on Nathaniel's beard.

If Gabriel set hands on those white men, and militia officers too by the look of them, they'd kill him for sure. He knew that, but he still stepped forward and grabbed one by the shoulder.

Burr knocked his hand out of the way, and stood in his place, flipping his lapel over to show the young men a ribbon pinned there. "Can I implore you gentlemen not to manhandle my companion?"

It was phrased like a question, but it sounded like a threat. The young rowdies looked at his lapel, his face, and then stepped back. "Yes, sir," one said.

"Didn't mean no harm, sir. We just thought — "

"Where'd you serve, sir?"

Burr eyed them like a plantation overseer, a hard one. "At Quebec, with Montgomery when he fell, and at Monmouth Courthouse, and at other places where I taught boys like you the meaning of discipline." They

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all snapped to attention. "Now unhand that old veteran and remember that not all of this nation's friends to liberty wear the same uniform as you."

Amid their profusion of apologies, Burr pushed Nathaniel and Gabriel out the door and set off at once down the street. Gabriel looked around for the woodcarter but he was gone.

"The Sons of Cincinnatus," Burr said, by way of explanation. "Our native soil's new nobility, ready to prove themselves against the real and imagined enemies of their country the way their fathers did against the British."

A few paces farther on he spoke again.

"Washington arrived in town last night and dines tonight with one of the directors of the federal bank, a mutual acquaintance. I need to gather some particular items, then go there at once."

BETTY WAS GONE when they returned to her house, but Burr let them in. He produced a writing box from his coat pocket, and, sitting down at the table, unfolded and spread a sheet of paper to compose a letter.

Nathaniel grabbed his rifle, checked his powder horn. "They had no cause to go treating me that way, those unscrupulous sarpants. Even a Mingo'd show more respect to a man." His voice shook with strained fury.

Gabriel paced around the table, ignoring Nathaniel's continued mutterings, and read over Burr's shoulder.

My dear Theodosia, the letter said, *I am indebted to you for a very great portion of the happiness which I have enjoyed in this life, and now that I may...*

A word, a name, farther down the page, caught Gabriel's eye.

...the rest of my possessions. As for the seal of the late George Washington, you may keep it as an heirloom or give to whom you please.

Gabriel must have leaned too close, because Burr glared at him. He stepped away.

"They had no right!" Nathaniel said. "You can't steal a man's pride and not expect him to do something about it."

"That's the truth," Gabriel said, nodding.

Burr folded the letter when it was dry, then addressed and sealed it

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with an isinglass wafer. Leaving it on the pine table, he stood up. His hands had steadied and the pain of his headache seemed transformed into grim resolution. Picking up the box with the dueling pistols, he regarded the two men carefully. "Nathaniel," he said, "may I request that you carry this for me?"

Another command. For a man who pretended to ask questions, he gave an awful lot of orders.

In a district full of mansions, one house crouched on its dark corner like a huge dog, the yellow light from two windows watching the street like a pair of eyes. A horse and carriage waited out front. A board fence surrounded the garden abutting the house.

Burr led them through a back gate to the kitchen door. "Gabriel," he said, "I must rely on you here. Knock on the door and inform them you have a message from a Mr. Ormond. The name will mean something to them, whether they show it or not. Hold the door open for me once you're inside."

Gabriel exhaled slowly. He didn't have to do this, didn't have to do what no man told him to do anymore unless he wanted to. He wanted to find out more about Washington, though. "Suh."

He mounted the steps and banged on the door.

A moment later, it swung open. A tallish, brown-skinned woman with a pinched face looked him over, from head to foot. "What'd'you think you're doing, busting the door down after dark?"

"Sorry, ma'am. I have a delivery from Mr. Ormond."

Her mouth puckered like she'd sucked on a lemon. "Step inside then. It'll be just a moment."

Gabriel heard men talking, even arguing, through one of the walls. The noise abated for a second, and soon after a gentleman appeared who took one glance at Gabriel and demanded, "Where's Ormond? Why is he sending another ruff — "

"Hello, William," said Burr, pushing past Gabriel. He'd already set his pistol box upon the counter, disguising the motion with his hat.

The other gentleman blanched. "I almost wish it was that scoundrel instead of you, Burr."

"I apologize for the subterfuge, but I could think of no other method to attain admittance."

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"With good reason! You supported Jefferson!"

"Will you vouchsafe me a moment's conversation with Hamilton?"

"Washington, you mean."

Burr bowed his head. "If he insists on that title, then yes, with Washington."

"Why do you wish to see him?"

"I come only to account for my actions, and to beg his forgiveness for unintentional affronts." Burr's voice was cold and even, the sound of a man saying what he must, regardless of intentions. Gabriel didn't believe him for a second.

The gentleman blew out his cheeks, gripped his belt, and adjusted his pants. "God knows we could use a spokesman for reason. Let me escort you into the parlor."

Gabriel stood in the kitchen, momentarily forgotten, like a tool set aside. That suited him just fine. He could be about his own work until they noticed him again.

As the gentleman led Burr around through the hall to the parlor, Gabriel found the servants' entrance that connected to the kitchen. He pressed his fingertips on the door and pushed it open just a crack, then leaned against the wall so he could peer through. He saw a Turkish rug, a ceiling painted like the sky, covered with little angels, and either four or five men with drinks in their hands.

The room fell quiet as Burr entered. A man who could have been Burr's twin — the same height, same pallor and carriage, the same weary expression — laughed aloud. It was Washington, the new one, Gabriel realized, recognizing him from the portraits he'd seen in newspapers. His heart pounded. If he had ten more fellows, he could take them all hostage....

"Well, well, the prodigal son comes home," Washington said.

The other men seemed to take this as permission to speak.

"If only all traitors would turn themselves in."

"Don't go slaying any fatted calves yet."

"Forgive my presumption, Washington, but I thought — "

Burr stared at Washington. "Hello, Alexander. Theodosia sends her regards, as always, to Angelica, and inquires as to her health and happiness."

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"What?" laughed a corpulent man in a general's uniform. "You come all the way from the safety of your backwoods exile, at the risk of your neck, to exchange familial pleasantries? Why don't you tell us how your Quaker whore is doing? Does she still have a residence in the city?"

Burr scowled at him. "Permit some simple civility between us. Alexander and I have been colleagues at the bar for twenty years. Our daughters grew up together and are good friends."

Washington sipped his wine and regarded Burr. "None of your machinations this time, Aaron. We do know each other far too well. Tell me directly why you've come here."

Burr nodded, as if he expected no less. Gabriel leaned closer to the crack and held his breath. He wanted to know the same thing.

"I've come to plead, but not for my own safety," Burr said. "Alexander, we cannot have the nation divided while we're at war with France, not with this Napoleon ruling — "

"The new Caesar," interjected the fat general.

"Without waxing prolix," replied Burr, "the new Caesar sits atop my list of fears." (Gabriel knew a few Caesars, but they were all slaves.) Burr turned back to Washington. "Before the election next year, call back Jefferson from Paris and Napoleon's court. Pardon him, forgive him, do whatever you must. Better that he should serve his native land rather than Napoleon."

Washington turned away from Burr on the pretense of refilling his cup, and in that moment looked to Gabriel like a man who had prepared a dinner for himself only to find he didn't care for the taste of it.

The general cleared his throat. "There's not going to be an election next year. It's not prudent, not in time of war, with enemies on all fronts and the country in rebellion."

"It's no rebellion!" snapped Burr. "So some backcountry farmers riot at a few courthouses because of a whiskey tax — it would have been nothing if you hadn't hung Gallatin and Bradford for rebels."

"They were traitors," Washington said, his voice bitter and resolute. "And so is Jefferson."

"Jefferson may have some liberal opinions — "

"Libertine," snorted another man, whom Gabriel couldn't see. He pressed on the door to widen the crack.

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" — but he has always been a true friend to liberty and may be the only one of us the common men will listen to now!" Burr spun his fingertips in a slow circle on his temple, his brows furrowed. "Blame it all on John Adams, instead. He's universally despised. He mishandled everything after Washington's untimely death. His lack of resolve let the Whiskey Rebellion grow out of hand, his foreign policy induced the French to attack our ships. You had to take control the way you did and everyone accepts that. Now be magnanimous in victory — "

"Jefferson's own letters condemn him," the general said coldly. "He advised the rebels to fight against federal troops."

Burr snapped again. "Jefferson thinks he knows everything, even when, as in military matters, they lie outside the scope of his experience — don't be deluded by a few ill-chosen words. Again, I beg you, call him back, proclaim a general amnesty and reunite the country."

Gabriel's head spun with new plans. He would have to talk to Burr afterward, find out who all these men were, whether this was Washington's residence.

He glimpsed the servant woman in the kitchen behind him. He pretended not to see her, so she'd leave him alone.

"If," Washington was saying, "we are to ascend to our proper place among the nations of the world, we cannot be divided by parties but must be a federal whole. Traitors must be punished swiftly and without mercy wherever sedition arises."

Burr laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "Isn't it easier to remind good men where their true loyalties lie? When George Washington spoke to the mutinous officers at Newburgh — "

The fat general slammed his hand on a table, shifting his bulk so that he blocked Gabriel's view through the crack. "We were not mutinous!"

Washington's voice: "The man was like a father to me, Burr. Don't speak to me of him — I know him better than you. You're not worthy of him. You're nothing but a sad rake, an opportunist, and a damn rascal."

A long pause, then Burr's voice: "I'll suffer no more of your calumny. You'll apologize for those comments or I'll have satisfaction immediately. I've come prepared."

A duel — Burr was challenging Washington to a duel! He must have known, or suspected, it would come to this. Gabriel turned toward the box

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with the dueling pistols. The woman stood there with the lid open, removing the guns.

"Hey!" He tried to take the box from her, and ended up snatching one of the pistols from her grasp.

"Murder! Help! Murder!" she cried.

The door to the parlor flew open. Gabriel stood there for a second, the gun in his hand pointed straight at Washington. The men restraining Burr shouted and then rushed toward him.

He turned and sprinted out the back door. It banged shut behind him. He jumped over the fence gate but didn't see Nathaniel in the alley.

As shouts arose in the street out front, he ran back toward the heart of the city, gun in his hand.

Slipping from shadow to shadow, alley to alley, Gabriel tried to find his way back to the house. He could meet Nathaniel there and the two of them would leave the city together.

As he went on, the buildings took on distorted, unfamiliar shapes, and the city seemed transformed into something malignant and dangerous, so that he thought he was close to the house but wasn't sure. A woman walked alone in the middle of the street. He ducked behind the corner of the building until he recognized Betty, Burr's lady friend.

Before Gabriel could approach her, to warn her of Burr's danger, he saw a man rise from the porch of a house and go take her by the arm.

"Whither so fast at this time of night, love?" the man asked. With his arm about her waist, he began to draw her toward the porch, polluting her cheek with kisses.

Gabriel heard her say something, but he didn't hear what. His reaction was as swift as if his own wife had been threatened. He ran to her side, pulled her free of the man's grasp, and then struck the side of his head with the butt of the pistol. The man staggered. Gabriel punched his jaw, dropping him to the ground.

He stood there panting, the panic in him subsided. It felt good to hit a man. He looked at Betty. Her hands framed her face, mouth open, then she found her voice and began to scream.

"No, ma'am," he said, waving his hands, "I have to tell you, it's about the colonel, he — "

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Her eyes, however, had fixed on the gun in his fist, and she screeched louder.

He ran blindly as people seemed to pour out of the houses onto the street. He dodged down a side street and ran into a group of men coming out of a building to look. One of them was the woodcarter from the Indian Queen Hotel.

"Well, if it isn't the scarecrow," he said. He reached out and snatched away the pistol before Gabriel could protest, and hid it inside his coat. "Maybe you ought to come after me."

HE LED GABRIEL on a dog-legged trail through alleys and backyards until they came to a warehouse. Gabriel could smell the waterfront, and then, inside the dark building, tobacco.

"You'll have to trust me," said the woodcarter, "and wait here. Won't be able to help you if I come back and you're gone."

Gabriel pulled up an empty hogshead and sat down with his back to the wall, exhausted. He'd been one room away from Washington and his generals, the men who'd taken over the country from President Adams, and he hadn't done anything but run....

A half dozen men entered the warehouse, all black. One of them carried a lantern, casting a greasy light that glinted off the barrel of another's gun. Gabriel stood up. If they were thinking about turning him in, they'd need more than one gun.

"This here's Absalom Jones," the woodcarter said, "minister of the African Church, and these are members of the Free African Society." To the other men, he said, "This here's the fellow I was just telling you about."

The minister stepped forward, dressed and acting more like a well-to-do merchant than anything else. He wore fine clothes, with his beard trimmed and neat, and his face all business. "Where's that poster?"

One of the other men handed over a paper.

Jones angled it toward the light of the lantern and read aloud. "'A runaway from Henrico County, Virginia, of brown complexion about six feet three or four inches high, a bony face, well made, and very active. Scars on his forehead.'" He looked up. "How'd you get those scars?"

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"Whipped in the face," Gabriel said. He'd been young and too full of sass.

Jones turned back to the description. "'A fellow of courage and intellect above his rank in life.'" He waved the paper at Gabriel. "Is that you? Are you Prosser's Gabriel?"

No mention of the overseer's murder. Maybe it hadn't been connected to him after all. "I'm nobody's man but my own," he answered.

A couple of the men smiled at that, and one said "Amen."

The woodcarter rubbed his chin. "He knocked some white man down in the street, which shows courage but a suspicious lack of intellect, if you ask me."

A couple men smiled at that too.

The minister Jones waved the paper at Gabriel again. "Is this you?"

Gabriel snatched the paper and read it. Mentioned his blacksmithing, but no murder. Maybe he hadn't needed to run. Too late now. He handed the paper back to the minister, but one of the other men reached out to take it. "That's me," he said.

Jones put his hands on his hips and stretched his shoulders back. "A good many of us started out as slaves and are slaves no longer, but if we harbor prominent runaways in the city, all our efforts to influence the laws and steer the course of this nation will be negated by the mistrust of those in authority. Have you heard about the Ohio Territory?"

Gabriel put his hands on his hips and mirrored the other man's stance. "Law says no slavery beyond the Ohio River, ever."

"That's right. We've got a network of people set up all the way out west, who can get you across the Ohio River. There are free communities there that could use a blacksmith, and a man with your abilities could rise to prominence in time. If you did that, we would collect funds to purchase your freedom."

One of the other men shifted. "We've done this for other runaways."

"But," Gabriel said, and the word stuck in his throat, because he had always dreamed of freedom, and here were former slaves promising to pay his way out of slavery. "My wife, my brothers, all my family would still be slaves."

"We're working to change that forever," Jones said, "with abolitionists

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here and abroad. In the meantime, you could work, accumulate some funds and purchase their freedom too."

"Freedom's not for sale!" Gabriel blurted.

But freedom was for sale, even if it shouldn't be, and they all knew it, including him.

"So, Benjamin," Jones said, looking toward the woodcarter, "you'll take him west tomorrow, across the river. Keep him lying low until then."

"Yes, sir, be happy to do that."

Gabriel had the feeling his freedom had just been bought, packed, and shipped one more time.

The statehouse bell began to chime at dawn, then stopped abruptly. Ben gave Gabriel some new clothes before he went out from his house to see why it rang. He returned with his wood cart and motioned Ben on up to the bench beside him.

"Nobody's going to be looking for runaways today," he explained. "They're hanging a traitor down at the statehouse."

Gabriel thought at once of Burr. "That why the bell, it ringing?"

"Uh-huh, except it done cracked while they were at it, and now folks are calling that a bad sign."

"It's a bad enough sign for him they're hanging," said Gabriel, and felt even more downhearted.

The wagon joined the general flux of people toward the hanging. A mob of all classes and ages of people surged around the statehouse grounds, and the wagon could only pass by on the far block. Gabriel sat up high enough to see over the crowds. A large group of soldiers, hundreds of them, formed a barricade around the elm where the noose dangled. Gabriel had never seen so many soldiers before. He figured he could march a thousand armed slaves into Richmond, but even that number couldn't stand against this many soldiers. The sound of the crowd was like a strong wind in the trees, and then it fell completely silent, as the trees do before a storm.

Washington came out to a platform near the elm, surrounded by a phalanx of men, and the crowd, especially the young men, cheered. Burr was led out on a horse, with his hands tied behind his back, so everyone could see him.

The fat general stood up and read a list of crimes that Gabriel couldn't

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hear because he was too far away, and the crowd closer in jeered and screamed with each new proclamation.

The whole time Washington stood there in prominent view with his hands folded behind his back.

When the general finished, Burr's horse was led under the tree, and the noose slipped around his neck. The crowd fell into an expectant and solemn hush.

Burr's voice pierced the silence, carrying even to Gabriel's ears. "I would rather die a free man, in a free country, than live as a sla — "

His last words were cut off as two men, starting forward, prompted the horse to skitter sideways. Burr slid slowly off the animal and dangled there a moment. Then he began kicking his legs, swinging back and forth like a clock pendulum.

Gabriel felt helpless and angry. He turned his face away from the scene. And saw, on the rooftop behind them, the long gray line of a rifle. For just a second, he had a vision of expert marksmanship, of the bullet slicing the hangman's rope in half, and Burr dropping safely to the ground. Then the barrel jetted black smoke and orange fire, and Gabriel, turning back, saw the red stain spreading already on Burr's chest.

"Hol-ee!" said Ben, craning his neck to look at the shooter. Then he shouted "Haw, haw!" and turned the horse to drive the wagon away from the statehouse.

The commotion on the execution grounds swelled without a focus. Gabriel twisted in his seat, glimpsing fringed buckskin, a foxskin cap, and a sliding ramrod on the rooftop, near the dormer beside the chimney. The rifle leveled, belched again. Gabriel turned his head, expecting to see Washington fall, but he stood, unperturbed, hands behind his back, chin high in the air, as the lead splintered a post on the platform just behind him.

Guns fired in reply from the direction of the army, and men rushed the house where Nathaniel had set his ambush. The hunter had slipped. First a few slate tiles sailed off the roof, then the gun came down, and then the old man, grabbing at the verdigris gutter to break his fall.

The cart turned another corner and Ben whipped his horse down the street. More gunfire and screams followed after them.

"You knew them," Ben said as they pulled further away, "you knew both of them, the one they hung and the one as shot him! Those were the two fellows I saw you with in the Indian Queen."

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Gabriel turned around in his seat. The uneven road jostled him, so he bounced shoulder to shoulder against Ben, but he only stared straight ahead.

"No. No, I didn't know either one of them."

The road soon sloped down to the ferry. The ferryman, leaning on the footbridge, straightened as they approached the landing.

"Who's paying?" the ferryman asked.

Gabriel had no money. He continued to stare off at the horizon, feeling distant to everything, like he'd be looking at the horizon forever, while Ben said, "I'll be paying this time."

"Reckon that'll do," said the ferryman as he led the horse and wagon onto the ferry.

On the other side, on their way up the wooded hills, out of sight of the toll-house, Ben said, "So how's it feel to be free?"

"Figure I won't ever be free until everybody's free," Gabriel said without hesitation. Going toward Ohio felt like nothing but the wrong direction to him.

"How you figure that?" asked Ben.

Gabriel thought about all the folks down home, and about Nathaniel and Betty, and those men they called rebels who were hiding out in the wilderness or living in exile because they were afraid. "George Washington, he a hero, sure enough, 'cause he risked everything he had to fight for this country's freedom. But the way I see it, the country's made up of people, so it can't be free until all the people's free. That's all."

Ben rolled his head side to side, like someone weighing a piece of iron in his hand. "Minister Jones and those other fellows, they seem to think they can end slavery peacefully." He reached into his jacket, pulled out Burr's dueling pistol, and offered it to Gabriel. "But you ask me, the bill of sale for freedom, it's going to be written in somebody's blood someday, ain't no way around it."

Gabriel didn't care if it was his own blood so long as he died a free man. "So be it," he said. "If that's what it takes."

He took the gun and shoved it into his waistband, under his shirt. It jabbed against him hard, like all the pain in his heart fashioned, at last, into something solid he could hold. ☙

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CURIOSITIES

THE CADAVER OF GIDEON WYCK, BY ALEXANDER LAING (1934)

ALEXANDER Laing (1903-1976) was a poet, novelist, and anthologist best known for such popular seafaring adventures as *Jonathan Eagle, Matthew Early*, and *The Sea Witch*. Laing also turned his hand, with modest success, to more horrific subjects. His most notable effort in this vein was *The Cadaver of Gideon Wyck*, first published in 1934 and now largely, though not entirely, forgotten.

A pseudo-documentary supposedly written by "a Medical Student" and edited by Laing, *Gideon Wyck* concerns a grim series of events that occur in Altonville, Maine, fictional home of the Maine State College of Surgery. A lurid story of murder, madness, and medical horrors, the novel recounts the disappearance of Gideon Wyck, an ailing, controversial teacher and medical researcher whose embalmed cadaver eventually resurfaces in an hermetically sealed vault in the college dissection lab. The subsequent investigation embroils numerous members of the Altonville community, including David Saunders, the narrator, Mike Collins, a frequent blood donor and certified medical anomaly, and Manfred "Prexy" Allyn, the grotesquely deformed president of the college.

Certain aspects of the novel now seem dated, almost quaint. The prose is sometimes stodgy, the characterizations are overly broad, and the dialogue is often stilted and unconvincing. Still, writers as different as Karl Edward Wagner and Robert Bloch have publicly acknowledged Laing's influence, and it's easy to see why. For all its flaws, *The Cadaver of Gideon Wyck* remains a visceral, cleverly conceived melodrama whose raw narrative power still makes itself felt nearly seventy years after its initial appearance.

—Bill Sheehan

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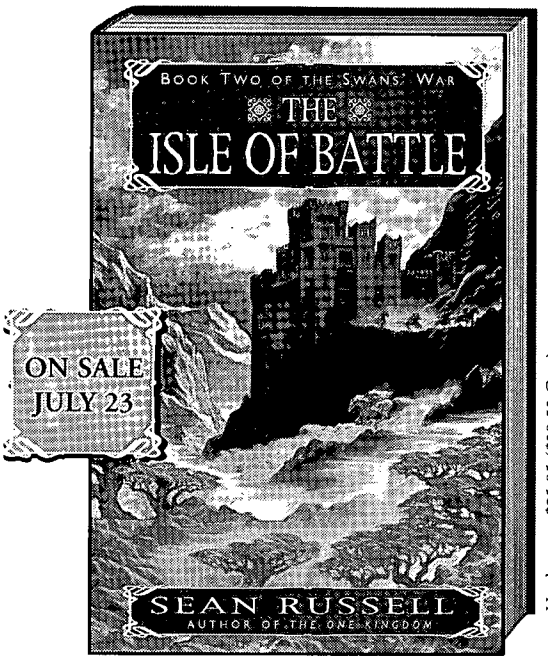

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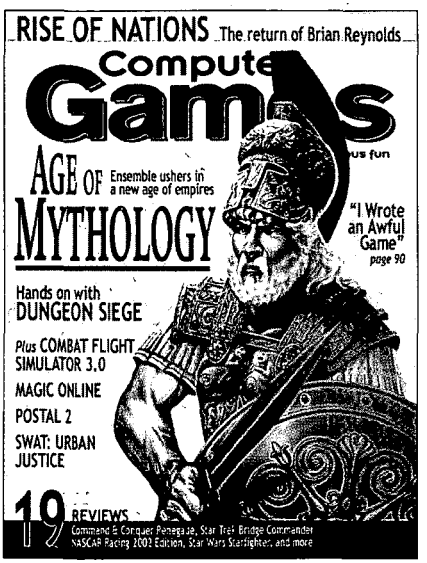
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